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BY
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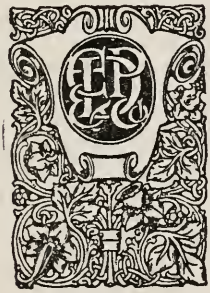

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CHAPTER I

SEATED apart and unnoticed in the embrasure of a window, the girl surveyed with a serene expression of contentment the shouting assembly that crowded the long drawing-room from end to end. At the new arrival within the range of her vision of any woman, her grave eyes studied dispassionately and quickly every detail of her dress, subsequently returning to the contemplation of a man who formed the centre of a group almost immediately in front of her.

Admiration of his physical qualities could hardly have been the cause of this recurrent attention, for he was a smallish, quiet-looking person, by no means in his first youth. Possibly a sense of sympathy drew her to him; for, except for herself, he was the only guest in sight who had entirely preserved mental and physical coolness. His associates directed most of their remarks to him, with vehement cries and gestures; and he replied softly, seriously and with unvarying deliberation. The smooth, hairless face was one of the calmest imaginable; the lips gently smiling, the pale, luminous eyes alive with a polite receptiveness, the whole expression admirably

balanced and tolerant. From the demeanour of his satellites one would have guessed him to be something of a notoriety, and the conjecture would have been supported by the fact that he had a rather remarkable skull. Its size was not the result of any local exaggeration; it was big and solid in every part, with a slightly convex forehead; a head which must have inspired the highest admiration and respect for its owner in any phrenologist. The pale chestnut hair was cut as short as was consistent with admitting a parting, and brushed smoothly. The ears were oddly, even rather unpleasantly small, with a perfectly straight upper edge. Had not the malformation occurred in both, it might have been taken to be due to an accident instead of to a congenital defect. The jaw was firm, but not prominent, the skin fair and the mouth well cut. There was nothing beautiful nor even remarkable in the face, beyond its tranquillity. His general aspect was that of a man somewhere between forty and forty-five years of age.

It is scarcely possible to look at a person in one's immediate neighbourhood for many seconds without attracting his notice, and very shortly the glances of the girl and the object of her scrutiny met. Immediately she allowed her eyes to travel slowly and composedly past him; but his remained fixed, and when, after a while, she casually looked back in his direction he was still watching her.

There was nothing impudent or challenging in his stare, which spoke only of an awakened interest; nevertheless it was sufficiently pronounced to cause one or two of his friends to follow its direction. The girl slightly turned her head away and began to interest herself in some newly arrived visitors; and while she was so engaged the man left his companions and sauntered down the room, to return a few minutes later in the wake of a portly, grey-haired lady, picturesquely dressed in a loose robe of lace.

"Little Shirley!" cried the elderly woman in a full rich voice which accorded with her dignified corpulence. "Sitting all alone and neglected! How very pathetic! I'd no idea you'd come, even. Couldn't you find me?"

"I did speak to you when I arrived; and really I've been quite happy sitting here watching the people."

"My dear, I haven't the faintest recollection of seeing you before, this evening. But there's such a crowd, isn't there? One's head quite spins. Do let me introduce Sir Edward Talbot to you; such an interesting man—but of course you've heard all about him. He's most anxious to know you. Sir Edward, come here! I want to introduce you to my friend, Miss Cresswell; and perhaps presently you'll take her and give her an ice or something. . . . How sweet of you to come, dear Clara! I was so afraid

that you might be too tired, after the theatre. Isidore has been asking anxiously after you. Will you come with me and find him?"

She moved off majestically, and Sir Edward Talbot, after bowing with affable dignity, took a seat beside Shirley on the little sofa.

"I hope you'll forgive me for forcing my company on you," he began in a pleasant, if rather expressionless, voice. "But you looked so cool and restful, and I soon get weary of strenuous warmth."

"There's been nothing to break my rest yet," she explained, smiling. "I haven't seen anyone here I know, so far, except Mrs. Cassilis."

"And she hasn't been looking after you properly? However, you appeared remarkably contented. I hesitated about disturbing you."

His manner clearly shewed that the approach of middle age had not robbed him of the pleasure to be derived from the society of an attractive woman.

"Oh, no! I'm glad to talk, though up to now I've been enjoying the clothes. That's my business in life, you see. I design dresses."

"Mrs. Cassilis was telling me. For Delbruck of South Molton Street, isn't it? I offer you my compliments. Several of the friends of whose company I feel proudest get their things there. Shew me some of your achievements here to-night."

"There's Mrs. Cassilis herself."

"Really? That's quite a triumph. She looks delightful, and I know that she has the most innocently *baroque* taste. If she was left to herself she would probably make herself as flamboyant and angry in appearance as she has allowed this room of hers to become. It must need great tact and courage to deal with her in matters of adornment."

"I have to be obstinate now and then. But she's so handsome and stately that it's pretty easy to make a success of her. Some of the people who come to us really fill me with despair. It's almost impossible to think of any tolerable way of covering them, they're so—"

"Amorphous?"

"That wouldn't matter so much. No, I mean they haven't *any* shape; nothing to suggest to one any line, however fantastic. I should love to be able to refuse a customer occasionally, when she's an extreme case. But of course I'm not allowed to; and after all it's very good for me to have to get over difficulties that look impossible at first."

"I can imagine that it's a wearing profession—art, rather. But most art is tolerably exasperating, I'm told. May I ask why you took to it? Just for the love of the thing?"

"Oh no! Chiefly to make a living."

"In that case I congratulate you on having already made such a position for yourself. Were you all

alone in the world, then, when you set out on this career?"

There was a placid intimacy in his tone that robbed his questions of the suspicion of mere prying, and Shirley made no effort to discourage them.

"Not actually. My father was in India—he was a soldier—and my mother died years and years ago. I was twenty, and living with people who were paid to look after me. They were quite nice, but it was all very dull, and I was always hard up. So I tried this, never really believing that anything would come of it."

"I suppose you knew the people who run Delbruck's, did you?"

"Delbruck's wasn't going in those days. But I had a friend who kept a shop in Brompton Road. She admired the dresses that I used to make for myself, and offered me a job. I was with her for a year and a half. One of her customers was Emmeline Brook—she and her sister are Delbruck's, you know—and when she started her business she got me to come to her. Of course, it was a great lift for me; and my friend was awfully nice about it, and urged me to accept. The Brooks had a Frenchwoman then for their principal designer, but she had a row with them after a year of it and went back to Paris. So for the last three years I've had her place."

"That's to say that you are now Delbruck's. You

ought to set up for yourself. I see no point in making other people rich."

"But they're awfully kind, and they pay very well."

"No doubt. They're afraid of losing you and most of their customers at the same time. In any case they should take you into partnership; but, if I were you, I should stand alone."

"That means capital."

"I don't imagine that there'd be any difficulty in finding that. So many rich people must know your genius by this time."

"Genius sounds very important," she said, laughing. "Honestly, I should only make a mess of it, I know. I've no idea of business. I'm more suited for a hireling."

"Anybody can learn business, if they like. But if it repels you, perhaps your father—"

"He's dead. He was killed two years ago."

A girl of seventeen or so, her yellow hair cut in a short straight shock, her eyes and cheeks bright with excitement, passed in conversation with a young man, whose shoulders and complexion told of military service. She nodded, smiling gaily, to the pair on the sofa, and went on her way, glittering like a Christmas-tree fairy in her dress of silver tissue. Her escort looked back over his shoulder at Shirley, and apparently made some inquiry about her of his companion.

"And you've no relations left at all? You live all by yourself?" Sir Edward continued with a grave sympathy.

"Yes. I've got a little flat in Wigmore Street. On the whole, I'd rather be alone, unless, of course, there was somebody I was really devoted to. . . ."

Talbot smiled.

"I suppose there will undoubtedly be someone before long."

"I dare say. Did you like Joyce Cassilis' dress? That's one of mine too."

"I thought that it was charming. Silver suits her exactly."

"Most things suit her, with that wonderful skin and colouring. She's very pretty, don't you think?"

"Very; and conceives herself to be even more than that."

"Oh, but all pretty girls are a little vain, naturally."

"Is that so?" His intonation, at times, very faintly suggested an American origin. "They don't all display their vanity."

"That's only because they're sly."

"Don't be so self-depreciatory. It's morbid."

"I'm very fond of Joyce."

"In that case I regret suggesting that she had any faults at all. I agree with you that she's an attractive and lively little person. I've know her since she was fifteen; but she's never really admitted me into

the inner circle of intimacy. I am not old enough for that honour; and I know now that I shall never be."

"Surely she doesn't like old men?"

"You don't quite follow me. She considers that my mind is immaturely trivial. You must have noticed that she even patronises her mother a good deal; and she speaks of her three married sisters with a pity that is akin to love."

"She doesn't patronise me, so I suppose I must be old too," Shirley reflected with a smile. "But she certainly is rather grown-up for her age. I'm eight years older; but I never remember it when we're together."

"I'm glad she's kind to you. She can be very crushing when she likes. I speak from experience," he answered, with a burlesque ruefulness.

There was a pause, during which Shirley's eyes wandered over the company, returning to her companion with a swift obedience as he spoke again.

"You will think me very intrusive, I'm afraid; but there's a purpose in my question. It's not really an impertinence. You have lost someone else lately, besides your father?"

"Yes," she admitted, in a slightly hushed tone. "About the same time."

"Don't talk about it if it's distressing. Had you been engaged long?"

The girl shook her head dumbly; and her eyes,

after growing a trifle brighter, softened and darkened. Sir Edward sighed quietly and looked away.

"I'm surprised that I haven't met you before, either here or at Overbourne, as you're a friend of the family," he resumed presently.

"Yes. I've been here pretty often lately, but I haven't been asked to their country place yet."

"Have you known them long?"

"Not more than a few months; but they're so easy to get on with that it seems much more than that. You're an old friend of theirs, I suppose."

"I met them first two or three years ago, when I came over to England with a business introduction to old Isidore."

"Oh?" She hesitated, as if feeling that it was now her duty to ask a few questions, in return for all those which she had answered. "Were you in France, then?"

"No. I had been living for a good while in America."

"Really? I've always wanted to go to New York. They have wonderful ideas of dressing there, haven't they?"

"I believe so. I don't know the most fashionable parts well. Much of my time was spent in South Carolina . . . Charleston."

"Is that near New York?"

"Not very."

"You are an American, aren't you?"

"Dear me, no! I was born in Worcester, and educated in this country. But since those days I've made my home in various parts of the world. I like change."

Shirley seemed to reflect.

"You weren't at Oxford, I suppose?"

"Why not? Have I lost the famous manner?"

"I don't know what it's like," she confessed.

"I must try and reproduce it for you, if I'm not too much out of practice. Yes; I was there for a short time. I didn't take a degree."

"What was your college?" she asked quickly and gravely.

"Worcester."

There had been a perfectly noticeable pause before he answered, which suggested strongly that he had either been searching his memory—a manifest absurdity—or stimulating his inventive faculty. Yet he appeared too well-bred a man to believe that the fact of having been in residence at a University conferred upon one a distinction. Had there been the least trace of boastful vulgarity in his demeanour, an observer might have been excused for suspecting that his undergraduate days were imaginary. Shirley considered him with a certain eagerness.

"I suppose that was more than seven years ago?" she suggested, raising her eyebrows in delicate interrogation.

"My dear Miss Cresswell! More than seventeen

years ago, I'm afraid," he answered, with good-humoured regret. "But why seven?"

"Oh, nothing! I went to Oxford for the boat racing—Eights' Week, do they call it?—then; and I was only wondering . . . I don't remember Worcester College. . . ."

She broke off again, and looked down at her hands, turning a ring which she wore this way and that, so that the diamonds with which it was set threw off the light in little rainbow sprays.

"What was *his* college?" asked Sir Edward casually.

"Trinity," answered Shirley; and then looked up at him with startled eyes, as though the information had been drawn from her against her intention. His answering glance was both gentle and solemn.

"You've been through a tragedy. But half the world has been through similar, or even more dreadful ones, in the last five years. Our hostess of to-night lost her only son—her favourite child—in nineteen fifteen. Hardly a household in England escaped entirely."

"I know. I'm afraid that doesn't console me," she replied, dropping her eyes once more; and added, after a pause: "But I don't encourage myself, really. As a rule I'm all right. I can't think how we got on to the subject."

"You're all right," Sir Edward persisted, lowering his voice. "All right! What a lamentable

condition for anybody, especially for a beautiful young artist!"

The words were uttered in the cool tone of one who states a generally accepted fact. The girl's expression grew faintly uncomfortable, but she neither spoke nor looked up. Sir Edward contemplated her for some seconds with a speculative eye.

"You aren't one of those, I hope, who see anything pious or altruistic or luxurious in keeping alive the memory of a past sorrow?"

"Not in the slightest degree. I know that . . . that father, for instance, would want me to forget and be cheerful. Only it isn't so easy. I mean, it isn't easy to forget entirely, is it? One gets on well enough for a time; and then, if one's tired or bored or anything, things come back."

"Nothing's easy, until you know how to do it; and everything is, when you do. It's possible to make your emotions, your subconsciousness—yes, and your physical sensations, as they are called—as obedient to your will as sheep-dogs are to the shepherd."

"People have told me that before, but I suppose I haven't a strong enough will."

"Everybody's will is of the same strength."

"Oh, Sir Edward!" she protested, smiling again.

"Everybody's," he maintained. "Will-power is a force that runs through the animal world continuously and at unvarying intensity, as electricity may run round a circuit. Suppose that circuit to pass

through a thousand houses. One or two of the occupants, skilled electricians, might make the force do nearly all the domestic work; a larger number of smatterers would contrive to get a certain amount of light out of it, or a degree of warmth. The utterly untrained would be able to put it to no use at all; and the ignorantly rash would only succeed in giving themselves painful shocks. You and I and Mrs. Cassilis, let us say, have the same store of will-power to draw upon; but experience has taught her to use it better than you can, while I have consciously trained myself to control it better than either of you."

Shirley sighed a little.

"Well, I dare say I shall be cleverer at it in time. Persistence is everything, isn't it?"

"Persistence is something, but not very much. If you gave an intelligent savage a sewing machine, without any explanation of its uses—forgive me for heaping these analogies on you—persistence might enable him to do something with it in a few years' time. But it would save trouble to shew him, to begin with, how the thing worked."

"You mean that *you* can teach people to forget, when they want to; and feel what they like, and all that?"

He smiled.

"Much depends on the person taught. The will, as I said, is the same in all; but the intelligence

varies. I think that any one could acquire complete control of the will, if he lived long enough; but the better the brain, the sooner the thing's done. The modern beauty specialists profess to be able to give anyone the ideally perfect face; but, you will agree, they would have a shorter job of it with you than with me."

There were a few moments of silence, during which Shirley studied his serenity with curiosity.

"Yes, you look as if you'd done it," she said, with a note of envy in her voice. "Are you what they call a Christian Scientist?"

"Mrs. Eddy belatedly got hold of a part of the truth. She was a highly incompetent preacher, but her basis (which is, as you know, immeasurably old) was sound enough. Still, it was only a part. There is an ethical Christian Science, as well, which I should like to talk to you about some day; and that, to be sure is only another part of the orderly whole."

"I've no brains at all," Shirley warned him. "These subjects puzzle me dreadfully. I couldn't possibly recommend myself to you as a pupil."

"I'm not proposing to 'take up your character'; I know enough of you already. You are different —not in manner, of course. You haven't yet realised the quality of your mind, which, if I may say so, is unusually responsive."

"How can you possibly know?" cried the girl in

a sort of indignation, as if a reputation for stupidity was dear to her.

"It is so. How do you know that I am clean-shaven? Or that you will cool your cheek by waving those feathers backwards and forwards?"

"Mummy sent me to tell you that she wants to introduce you to somebody before you go, Edward, but that on *no* account are you to desert Shirley until you feel you've had enough of her," interrupted Joyce Cassilis. She was standing alone before them, looking down on the pair with a gleam of amusement in her eyes. She had a rather loud voice, like a boy's, and a certain air of defiant joviality which associated oddly with her pronounced femininity of appearance and her fairy dress. "Mummy put it rather differently—I've forgotten how, but that's what it came to. Shirley, do come upstairs presently and have a talk. I want to tell you something. Will you? Promise!"

"All right. When are you going up?"

"Directly. There's nobody left I want to speak to, and I'm getting sleepy."

"I'm proud of your frock," said Shirley. "It's a great success. Sir Edward approves too."

"Doesn't it look nice? You were right about the girdle, after all. Of course yours is much nicer; but then you always keep the best ones for yourself, naturally. I love you in black. . . . What shall I tell Mummy, Edward?"

"Tell her, my child, that I will certainly come as soon as Miss Cresswell dismisses me, and not before. You might add that I consider you an impudent monkey, and recommend you for a diet of bread and water. . . . I grow hot and cold with shame, at times," he continued, as Joyce departed, with a smile of self-assured scorn of his last words, "when I have permitted myself to address that young woman playfully. One feels as if, in a moment of forgetfulness, one had attempted to tickle an archbishop. . . . Well, I suppose I shall have to set you free in a minute or two, Miss Cresswell. That's the worst of these parties, and the best. One momentarily tastes a number of new personalities, and then the plate is snatched away, and a new course is put on. There's a charm about it, but often it's a very tantalizing one. To-night I've parted without regret from a number of dishes, all in the wrong order, too; grape-fruit, and trifle with too much jam and too little sherry, and Roquefort cheese, and plain roast beef; and now when at last I find one which I confess I should like to linger over . . . to what dare I liken you?"

"Porridge?" suggested Shirley, after consideration.

"How can you? However, I hope we shall meet again. In fact, unless you decide to the contrary, I shall see that we do. So prepare your excuses."

"But I should like it! Why not? I want to hear

more about your dodge for feeling just as you want to feel."

"The dodge shall be explained up to any point that you desire. Meanwhile—or in case you change your mind, or are only being politely mendacious—I should like to ask you this: Are you religious, as they call it?"

The question produced its frequent effect. Shirley looked highly startled and confused, and answered with a shamefaced haste.

"I—well, I go to church, you know. Not always, but. . . ."

"I quite understand. But at any rate you are a Christian?"

"Oh, *yes!*"

"And have you found that your belief consoles you at all?"

She hesitated.

"Yes, Of course, one feels that . . . well, everybody's going to meet again some day, aren't they? It's rather hard to remember, just when. . . ."

She broke off; and Sir Edward, having waited politely and fruitlessly for the end of her explanation, came to her rescue.

"In fact, it's never really consoled you the least in the world. You believe these promises, just as you believe that one day you yourself will die. You know it is so, and you feel it's utterly impossible."

"Anyhow, it's rather a long way off, and one

can't quite imagine what it's going to be like, can one?"

"I see that you don't accept the harp and crown idea literally. May I take it that you're not one of those who limit their beliefs to what they are able to extract unaided from the Bible?"

"I don't really know," Shirley confessed, half smiling, half apologetic. "I'm afraid I haven't read the Bible since I was at school."

"The Bible," Sir Edward gravely informed her, "is a great revelation. But it is only one of a number of similar keys to the mysteries; and to the uninitiated it is about as helpful as a German cookery book would be to an Irish general servant. No doubt, however, you have long realized that it covers, under a most elaborately devised cloak of words, some very awful and eternal truths."

"Yes. I suppose it does."

"You know that many have been brought to believe, by it and other writings, to say nothing of spoken words, that the visible world, like the speech of these prophecies themselves, is little more than a splendid and sombre curtain, purple shot with gold, behind which a vast stage is set for the unending drama of which only a few have yet been permitted to catch an occasional glimpse."

His manner, during the last few minutes, had changed from a rather formal friendliness to something that was almost enthusiasm of a restrained and

majestic kind, and the girl looked at him uneasily.

"Oh, but I think that's such an uncomfortable idea. Mrs. Cassilis believes in spiritualism. Is that what you mean?"

"Perhaps we may say that that's a little bit of what I mean."

"But surely you don't believe in all those things that go on in the dark, do you? Napoleon coming to tell you how he's getting on, I mean; and the furniture moving about; and knocks and bells, and tambourines, and all that."

"The thing has got, for many reasons, largely into the hands of vulgar or pedantic people, for many years now. But because quacks advertise electric belts, or furriers sell coats of 'electric seal,' we don't necessarily deny the existence of electricity, do we?"

"I shouldn't *think* so," said Shirley judicially.

"So what is commonly described as spiritualism; so with the fortunes that gipsies tell, and the glass balls which are common in upper rooms in Bond Street, and many other things, some still partly believed, some wholly discredited, some just beginning to come into their own. You have an open mind on the subject, Miss Cresswell, I'm sure."

"I hate being frightened."

Sir Edward smiled humourously at her air of distrustful appeal.

"You shan't be frightened. Fear comes from ig-

norance. To know is to put fear behind you. . . . There is Mrs. Cassilis, looking at me in gentle reproach. I suppose I must go to her, although I'd much rather stay where I am."

He rose from his place, bowed with rather more ceremony than is usual in English drawing-rooms, and crossed over to his hostess, who forthwith introduced him to a young foreign woman of unbridled hideousness, of whom, it may be supposed, Mrs. Cassilis was glad to rid herself. Sir Edward, however, was clearly an admirer of other qualities in woman besides physical beauty; for he was soon in deep conversation with the ill-favoured exile, who, rolling great eyes of dubious sanity, submerged him in torrents of oddly pronounced French. After watching the pair, with a faint smile on her lips, for a few seconds, Shirley betook herself to an upper floor of the house, and passed twenty minutes or so in confidential talk, of a romantic nature, with her hostess' daughter in her pretty bedroom; at the end of which time she discovered that it was late, and that she should have gone home long ago.

As, gathering her cloak about her shoulders, she passed through the entrance hall, in conversation with a woman friend whom she had met on the stairs, she perceived Sir Edward Talbot watching her. He wore a dark overcoat, and carried a tall hat in one hand; and as she gave him a smile, he stepped forward at once.

"Have you a carriage here, or will you allow me to give you a lift home?"

"Thank you so much," answered Shirley. "Mrs. Spens is taking me."

She was passing on, with a word of farewell, when he spoke again.

"I've made Mrs. Cassilis promise to give me another opportunity of meeting you," he said, gazing earnestly at her. "If she asks you to Overbourne for a week-end, do accept, will you?"

A faint tinge of pink crept into her cheek, but she kept her eyes on his with a laughing frankness.

"I will if I can manage it, of course. Good night!"

She stepped into the landaulette, in which her friend awaited her, and Sir Edward watched it thoughtfully as it fussed away; its place at the kerb being taken by a limousine of the most august size and taciturnity, which seemed all too large and luxurious for the single, small, quiet man whom it snatched away into the starry summer night.

CHAPTER II

THE flagged garden at Overbourne was an ideal retreat on such a day as this Saturday in late June, when the sun ceaselessly veiled and unveiled its face in a sky of tumbled blue and white, and the south-easterly breeze rhythmically bent and relaxed the tall poplars that bordered the carriage-drive. High walls of impenetrably dense box shut in the little square, pierced on two sides by deep arches, from which paths wound into other and unseen mazes. At one end a pergola, climbed upon by roses, offered shade beneath which the small house-party was assembled at tea; at the other a long narrow bed was set with trim patterns of flowers. The flagstones, square and uniform in size, were of all shades of yellow, grey and white, and between them grew a thin piping of velvety moss, dark green for the most part, but occasionally widening into a patch of bright viridian. Behind the flower bed, in a niche contrived in the thickness of the hedge, a marble copy of Houdon's *frileuse* drew her drapery round those portions of herself which, according to conventional prejudice, least demanded it, with a mock modest air of the prettiest indecency. In the middle of the court a shallow stone basin had been sunk below

the level of the ground. Two broad steps led down to the water, which trembled ceaselessly, although almost imperceptibly, with the passage of the trickling stream that kept it fresh, and with the movements of little fishes. Water lilies, both white and pink, lay becalmed on their dark rafts; and in the glassy and dimpling surface were reflected the tops of the high trees which grew beyond the confines of the garden. Though these images were alive with the wind, hardly a breath of air stirred between these quickset walls.

Mrs. Cassilis, her abundant grey hair concealed beneath a shady hat, had fitted her generous figure into a somewhat inadequate seat of basket work, and her hands were busy with teapot and milk-jug. Beside her, the slight form of Sir Edward Talbot was almost invisible in an immensely deep arm-chair. His flannel clad shins, neat brown shoes, and an occasional plume of grey smoke arising from the depths of his hiding-place were all that told of his bodily presence. On a carved stone bench, the rigours of which had been mitigated by a number of gaudy cushions, a bald, pot-bellied, swarthy man was smoking a cigar, his little feet crossed and tidily tucked away beneath the seat; and next to him a thin girl, pale of skin and eyes, with startlingly red hair and lips, lounged in smiling contentment. In a little group apart, Joyce, her crocus head gay in the strong sunlight, was chattering and laughing

to two young men, of whom one was the sunburnt soldier who had been her squire at the evening party. The other, a handsome fellow of seven or eight and twenty, was plainly in bad health. His eyes were too bright, fixed and anxious, the spot of colour in his cheeks too vivid, his manner, when he spoke, too hectic, his silences too frequent and abstracted. There were signs too of slovenliness in his appearance, although his clothes were new and admirably cut. Joyce called him Gathorne, and the soldier Billy; and the latter listened and responded to her frivolities with a tell-tale indefatigability.

"Isidore," said Mrs. Cassilis to the bald man, "ring the bell. They haven't brought a cup for Shirley, and she may be here any moment. Oh, it's by you, Magdalen, dear. Do you mind?"

The red-haired girl discovered the hanging bell-push among the roses, and obeyed.

"Is that Shirley Cresswell? I didn't know she was coming," she drawled lazily. "I'm so glad. I adore her. Do you know her, Edward? Isn't she a darling?"

"Oh, Sir Edward knows her," Mrs. Cassilis interrupted, with a significant smile. "We all do, don't we?"

"I've only seen her," said Billy.

"That's all there is to do," suggested Gathorne.

"It isn't!" Joyce cried indignantly. "She's awfully clever in lots of ways, and jolly nice."

"Really?" Gathorne answered. "All the better. I haven't got beyond seeing her, myself; but she's quite worth seeing. Who is she, by the way? Any relation of the Whissendines?"

"I don't really know; very likely," said Mrs. Cassilis. "Her father was in command of his regiment, I believe, when he was killed, poor fellow. But he didn't leave her too well off, so the brave little thing, without any sort of help, got employment as a dress designer at Delbruck's—indeed that's how I met her; and now she must be earning quite a thousand a year. At twenty-five! Isn't it splendid of her? Particularly as there's no necessity for her to work at all?"

"What's the matter with her, then? Isn't she all there?" Billy wonderingly asked.

"Very much so," Joyce informed him in a crushing manner. "She doesn't like scratching along on twopence a year. Nobody but an idiot would."

"But she could marry well, any time she liked. That was what I meant," her mother explained. "She's quite a beauty. Everybody who meets her says so. I suppose she prefers to be independent; and then she's devoted to her work. Sometimes, too, I suspect that the poor child was in love with some boy who got killed. . . ."

"Oh, I know she was," Magdalen yawned. "Geoffrey Foulkes. . . . Of course, that was nothing. Everybody was in love with Geoff. I'm sure I

worshipped the ground beneath his feet—the only man I ever met that I could stand. But he and Shirley were engaged—"

"Actually? It was never given out, my dear, was it?"

"I don't think so. He told a few people; me, among them. No doubt he saw that I had designs on him myself, and thought it only gentlemanly to warn me not to waste my youth in vain endeavour. . . . Dear little Joyce, come and sit by me," she broke off, catching the girl's hand as she passed her, on the way from the tea-table with a fresh supply of cake.

"Oh, do let me go!" cried the other, disengaging herself testily.

"Was that the Foulkes who was brought down somewhere near Douai?" enquired Billy. "I knew him. He was a good sort."

"That's the man. He painted, you know, and was supposed to be going to do something at it."

"I have a couple of hith thingth," Mr. Cassilis joined in swiftly, taking his cigar from his full lips. "He wath very promithing; not many ideath, but he could draw; and drawing'th rarer than ideath, jutht now."

"Dear me, yes!" his wife agreed. "A charming boy! He stayed with us once; and his painting was most distinguished."

"No, no!" maintained Mr. Cassilis irritably. "He

couldn't paint. Loth of men can paint. He could draw."

"How sad!" ruminated Mrs. Cassilis, dropping the art question. "She'd have been very well off, if he'd lived to marry her; he was a relation of the banking Foulkes; and here she is being exploited by those odious Brook women, who've no notion of dressing themselves, let alone anyone else. I wonder she endures it."

"She told me she preferred a salary and commission job to taking any risks herself," said the voice of the unseen Talbot.

"But I'm sure that's only because she's too dispirited at present to bother about business. You must console her with your wonderful philosophy, Sir Edward. Or perhaps you'd rather console her otherwise?"

"I will buy her some chocolates, if you think they'd be any use."

"Oh, you've no romance in you at all. It must be by philosophy, then. Everybody tells me how extraordinary you are. I wish you could think me worthy of being one of your disciples."

Magdalen cast a stealthy look into the depths of the chair, and her elaborately curved mouth smiled faintly; while Gathorne tilted his dishevelled head backwards, with closed eyes, against the wooden frame of his deck-chair, as if wearied by the turn of the conversation. Mr. Cassilis drummed the

dome of his waistcoat with his short fingers impatiently.

"A disciple?" repeated Sir Edward in a tone of amusement. "I talk a great deal of nonsense, I'm afraid, to you and everyone else. No more than that."

"No, no," insisted the lady. "You have some new religion or system, whichever you call it. Rita Salomon told me so distinctly. She's a great admirer of yours."

"We all have some sort of system, no doubt, if we think of metaphysics at all. I must have explained a good deal of mine to you already in the course of conversation. But I'm always ready for fresh discussion."

She shook her head.

"You're deceiving me because you see I'm unworthy. Isn't he, Magdalen? I'm sure you know all about it."

"I should think he probably was," the girl replied in careless amusement. "I'd never trust a word he says. But he doesn't admit me into all his secrets, either."

"Rita spoke of you as if you were a new prophet —in quite a hushed voice. Truly she did. Ask Joyce."

"Oh, Rita talks in a hushed voice about all her men friends, Mummy," Joyce declared.

"And generally it's just as well," remarked Billy.

"Not in your case, sir, of course," he hastened to add to Sir Edward.

"You're quite right," Mr. Cassilis agreed, with his hurried lisp. "I don't like that Thalomon girl; never did. Never trutht Jewth—never. I wonder you have her in the houthe, Adela. She'th hand and glove with half the thcallywagth in London. If it hadn't been for her, you'd never have got mixed up in all thith thpiritualithtic nonthenthe . . ."

Mrs. Cassilis turned the gaze of a benignant elephant on her husband, and was drawing herself up to a reply, when a footman entered the flagged garden, ushering Shirley.

She looked a trifle alarmed at the general uprisal to greet her; bowed at Gathorne when introduced to Captain Billy Lovat; denied all knowledge of having met Gathorne Burrell before, subsequently recanting and blaming herself for her stupidity; accepted the formal kiss of Mrs. Cassilis dutifully, and the impassioned one of Magdalen with an air of startled surprise; smiled upon Sir Edward; and then, losing her head, forgot to take any notice at all of her host, and sought refuge beside Joyce, with an expression of relief.

"We've all been discussing you, dear," Mrs. Cassilis told her in her fatly affectionate, if slightly condescending, manner. "Your ears must have been burning for the last quarter of an hour."

"Oh dear!" murmured Shirley. Her voice spoke of a grave dismay.

"Miss Herbert—oh, of course, you know Magdalen, don't you?—has been saying such nice things about you; and Captain Lovat was most anxious to make your acquaintance."

The soldier's brown face took on a deeper colour.

"By Jove! Rather!" he cried, and proved his delight at the fulfilment of his ambition by turning his shoulder to the new-comer, and devoting himself almost feverishly to Joyce.

Mr. Cassilis, who was on the other side of Shirley, scarcely looked at her, and greeted her conversational efforts with the briefest words of agreement. A furtive embarrassment showed itself in his averted eyes and uneasy fingers, which he sought to alleviate by talking loudly to his wife, from time to time, across the intervening bodies of his guests. Shirley, relapsing into silence, glanced at Magdalen, who replied with a smile of sleepy amorousness; at Gathorne, who appeared unaware of her notice; and finally at Sir Edward Talbot, who had once more sunk into the recesses of his deep chair. His lips curved in polite recognition as their eyes met, but he made no attempt to entertain her; and it could hardly have been guessed that it was due to the request of this apathetic spectator that the girl had been included in the party. His heavy white eye-

lids drooped, and his body lay relaxed in luxurious carelessness of his surroundings. The air of the little, sunny enclosure grew drowsier. Only Joyce and Billy continued to talk and laugh unbrokenly; and the efforts of the girl to draw Shirley into a three-handed conversation were consistently defeated by the determination of the young soldier to address all his remarks exclusively to herself. Before long she rose to her feet.

"Would you like to have a look-round, Shirley?"

"Yes, do, dear," Mrs. Cassilis said, "and tell us if you approve of it. It's so delightful to have got you here at last."

The suggestion of the words was that Shirley had, till now, hard-heartedly declined to visit the house and issue such directions for alterations and improvements as seemed desirable to her superior taste. Joyce lighted a cigarette from Billy's case, and passed her hand through her friend's arm.

"Come along!" she said. "No, you stay where you are, Billy. I want Miss Cresswell to myself."

And passing through one of the deep archways, the two girls shortly emerged from the winding paths of the box labyrinth on to the broad and velvety lawn which lay beneath the southern windows of the house.

Overbourne was a big, flat-faced, red-brick building, of no architectural beauty, but warm and

friendly in tone, and cosily wrapped in creepers. It was raised above its surroundings upon a double terrace, balustraded with grey stone and set with large craters in which red and yellow flowers flamed like beacon fires. In the middle of the lawn a fountain threw a waving scarf of sequinned gauze into the wind and sunshine. There was a golden liveliness in the air which came as a pleasant change after the hushed warmth of the paved garden.

"What a lovely place!" said Shirley, standing still to admire the scene, her skirts fluttering, and one hand to her wide hat. Joyce paused at her side. Although eight years younger than her companion, she topped her by half a head, and the two made a vivid contrast, the girl strongly built, upright, and brilliantly coloured, the young woman small, slender and delicate in tone. Their voices too were widely dissimilar, Joyce's ringing out firmly in a boyish alto, Shirley's dancing and sparkling in the upper register.

"It's not bad, is it?" said Joyce.

"Bad! I wish it was mine."

"You may have it, as far as I'm concerned. I hate the country. There's nothing to do."

"But it's so pretty to look at."

"You can't go on looking at the same thing for ever; and it's never any different, except in the winter, or when it rains; and then it's beastly."

"Well, I think I'd rather live in London, as a

general thing; but I should love to have a country place like this to run down to when I felt rustic. One can have nice people to stay. . . ."

"But they're just as nice in a town; nicer, because they don't get bored and sleepy and stodgy."

"Does Captain Lovat get stodgy?" asked Shirley, looking at the other with a smile.

"Billy's only been down two days," replied Joyce, blushing brightly, but with an increased resolution in her voice and eyes. "I love him at present, but I dare say that in a few days he'd be as big a bore as Gathorne or Edward."

"Are they bores?"

"Gathorne's awful here. I can't think why he comes. Perhaps to get a good sleep. They say he never goes to bed in London. Edward's a dud anywhere."

"Oh, I thought him rather attractive."

"Did you really? Sorry!"

"Please don't apologise," said Shirley, laughing. "I've only spoken to him that one evening at your house; and you saw he wasn't very excited at meeting me again. He's an interesting looking man; that was all I meant."

"I know. Most people say that. I can't see the attraction. He's got a face like a blank wall."

"I think that's partly the interest. One wonders what's behind it."

"Probably nothing."

"Oh, there must be something, surely."

"Well, nothing to write to the papers about. Of course silly asses like Magdalen and Rita say he's so wonderful; they've always got to be swooning over somebody or something. But when you ask what he's done, they can't tell you. No, I believe he just lives on a sniffy manner."

Shirley shook her head.

"I'm sure he's clever, even if he doesn't do anything out of the way. By the bye, what is he? A writer or something?"

"Nothing nowadays, as far as I know. He must be pretty rich; he's got two or three cars, and a house in the country that he's just had built or altered for himself, and a flat in Sackville Street. He told me once that he was a speculator in his young days."

"The Stock Exchange! That's the last thing I should have taken him for."

"I don't know. I think he looks the part. He lived in America, you know; and Daddy knows lots of those Wall Street men, and they're mostly like that—clean-shaven and frightfully pleased with themselves and dressed like boys and not saying much except 'Sure' and 'Nope' and 'Gee' and that sort of rot."

"But that's just it; he does. Last time we met,

he talked a lot; and all about things which I should never have thought stockbrokers bothered themselves with; religion, and so on."

"I suppose he caught that from living among American millionaires. They're all very religious, Daddy says. Haven't you heard about James G. Stoniman, and that old Irishman who's got a castle in Galway about the size of the Crystal Palace, and is building Roman Catholic churches anywhere they'll let him, so as to get rid of all his money before he dies, for fear his sons might get hold of some of it afterwards? But I must say I didn't suspect Edward of being religious. When he first knew us, he was always asking me to things, and paying rotten compliments, and holding my hand when we were alone together. I couldn't stand it; so now he hardly speaks to me, except to say 'Run and play, child,' and infuriating things of that sort. I expect he'll begin holding your hand before long."

The two companions were walking slowly up and down the long stretch of shaven turf as they talked; and each time they passed the fountain the wind threw a few drops of fine spray against their faces. Swallows were wheeling in swift circles about them. Shirley made no reply to her friend's last anticipatory remark; and Joyce, after looking at her sideways, put her hand through her arm again.

"Do you know I never knew until to-day that you were engaged to Geoffrey Foulkes? He used to

come and see us sometimes. He seemed awfully nice."

She waited for an answer, but, seeing that Shirley only nodded vacantly, she squeezed her arm and let it go.

"Poor old Shirley," she said briefly, and added, after a pause, "I don't suppose Edward meant to be anything more than fatherly, but I hate fatherliness, don't you? No father ever goes on like that."

"Judging by his manner to-day, I should imagine that he hasn't the slightest intention of adopting *me*."

"I shouldn't worry. His friends are rather a scratch lot; except Mummy, of course; but she's friends with everybody. There's Gathorne, about as cheery as Good Friday in Aberdeen; and a whole tribe of women, like Rita Salomon, in sage-green jibbahs, with dirty silver rings on their thumbs, and their heads tied up in dish-cloths, and strings of brickbats round necks like a plucked chicken's; and Basil Jacinth—his real name's Bumpus—who's mad, and sits in corners saying nothing, with long hair combed down to join a loathsome soft beard; and that disgusting old E. D. Lewis, who shaves his forehead to make himself like Shakespeare, and writes the sort of books that people wrap up in brown paper if they want to read them in public; and Magdalen—I don't know; I always feel she's hiding

something nasty. But she does dress decently, at least. So does Edward. But most of the gang look as if they'd been acting an historical pageant in the rectory garden, for the organ fund, and got caught in the rain."

"Sir Edward looks so sensible himself. Why does he like people of that kind?"

"Probably he enjoys being worshipped; and only that sort of idiots will do it. If you really want to keep in with him, you'll have to worship too."

"I couldn't really. I'm far too prosaic. And I should get the sack if I turned up at South Molton Street in a jibbah. But I don't think you're quite fair about him, Joyce. He wasn't the least bit godlike or condescending to me."

"Well, you wait and see . . . I say, shall I take you and shew you the orchid house? We shall have to be dressing for dinner before very long."

At table that night Shirley found herself placed next to Sir Edward. He was serenely polite, inclining his head in silent acquiescence to most of her remarks, and leaving the choice of subjects wholly to her. The effect he produced was that of a courteous foreigner, imperfectly understanding the words addressed to him and capable of only the simplest replies. After a little of this collar-work, Shirley turned her attention to her other neighbour, Gathorne Burrell, who, stimulated by a good deal of champagne, was highly conversational in a vain and in-

tolerant manner which soon reduced the girl to a resentful subjection.

It was not until the following morning that the ex-speculator emerged from his cool reserve. The bell of the parish church was sending its cracked summons across the sunny meadows, and the members of the party at Overbourne were ignoring it in their various ways. Mrs. Cassilis, seated beside the tennis court in a beehive chair, was reading "The Pretty Lady," while Joyce and Billy were knocking the balls up aimlessly, having failed to induce anyone else to play, and being quite unsuitable opponents for a single. Gathorne, pleading neuralgia, was still abed; Magdalen, declaring that she could only do herself justice with her own racket and shoes, which she had forgotten to bring, was smoking contentedly indoors. Shirley, quite willing to join them, was as indifferent a performer as Joyce; and neither girl was disposed to match herself against Billy unless she had a reasonably good partner. Mr. Cassilis was doing nothing—his usual occupation when not engaged in money-making. He would sit for hours, his feet tucked primly under his chair, his hands folded on his stomach, motionless and unvocal, except when he cleared his throat in an ugly manner. As for Sir Edward, he had missed breakfast, and only emerged, dressed in snowy flannel, at eleven o'clock, when he immediately appropriated Shirley for his own entertainment.

"Tennis?" he replied to Joyce's suggestion. "Certainly not. I don't approve of games on Sunday."

"Don't be such an idiot!" she irritably begged him. "What possible harm can they do?"

"None whatever," he agreed with perfect amiability. "Indeed we may say that physically, if overstrain is avoided, they do good, no doubt. Come along, Miss Cresswell. I cannot believe that you are set on getting hot and dishevelled; and I must have company. Lovat, you can look after the child, and keep it in order."

And uncheered by any answering smile from Joyce, he led his captive away towards the labyrinth of cut hedges that surrounded the Dutch garden.

"You must pardon me for carrying you off from your friends," he told her, considering her gravely. "I haven't had a word with you, beyond the baldest formalities, since you arrived; and I only consented to come here at all on the understanding that I should meet you."

"But that wasn't my fault, really. I tried to talk to you."

"Yes . . . I was interested, for a time, in watching how you hit it off with Gathorne Burrell. Gathorne has many faults of manner; I have told him so often; and you are almost excessively considerate of the feelings of others. I fancy that your temperaments are too remote to make for friendship. His

attitude of superiority amused me a good deal. I hadn't supposed him to be so blind."

"How do you mean?"

Sir Edward covered her with his cool, bland smile.

"Why am I talking to you?"

"I can't imagine."

"That's insincere. You think it is because you are a beautiful girl, with a genius for adorning beauty. Well, you are partly right. There's no need to be embarrassed by the confession of a man so very much older than yourself that he finds in you, on this sunny morning and in this delightful garden, all the appeal of the lilies and pale roses that surround us —enchanting and pathetically fragile. But that's not all; indeed it's the smallest part of it. To my mind, there are other and stronger attractions in you."

Shirley, who had looked supremely ill at ease, during the exhibition of these late-Victorian compliments, made an obvious effort to treat the matter with appropriate frivolity.

"Please go on! I love feeling conceited."

"Well, for one thing, you are not grown up."

"I'm ashamed to say I'm twenty-five; but I know I'm stupid for my age. Are you fond of children?"

"That depends. I like children who are not grown up; and you are wrong in thinking that I describe you as immature because you are stupid. It is, in fact, exactly for the contrary reason."

"I don't understand."

"Shall we take this path?" he asked, pausing at one of the entrances to the box-maze. "There's rather an interesting thing that I want you to see. . . . Let me explain a little. You are not grown up at twenty-five, and you are therefore not stupid. But Mrs. Cassilis at fifty, and her husband at something more, and Captain Lovat at about your own age, and Joyce at seventeen are all thoroughly mature and, according to my standards, irredeemably stupid. You see, then, that it's natural for me to seek your society while I am down here."

"How about Miss Herbert and Mr. Burrell?"

"They are neither entirely children nor altogether stupid, which happens at times. But I know them too well. There is no sense of adventure in talking to them. . . . Stupidity, you see, Miss Cresswell, is a sort of disease-germ. It is not the absence of wisdom, as darkness is the absence of light, but an opposing force. It is positive, not negative. We are born wise, but the microbe of stupidity is in all of us, waiting to be cultivated or destroyed—or, at least, scotched. If you could get any baby born into the world to speak to you before stultifying influences have got to work on its congenital wisdom, you would find it perfectly wise."

"But surely experience—" interrupted Shirley, with a face of incredulity.

"Experience is not wisdom. So far from being a

paradox, the phrase 'Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings' is the purest statement of fact. Wisdom, like will-force, is a natural and universal gift; the power to judge, reason and discriminate. By experience one may learn to use the power—no more than that. Yet you see people with every form of experience growing daily stupider and stupider; one may say it is almost a general rule. They have cultivated their stupidity to a point where experience is not only useless but actually pernicious. They misapply it in every action and every thought. Taken in time, all human creatures could be saved from this creeping sickness; but the swiftness of its advance depends on surrounding influences, and many are past cure before they have learned to articulate. That, perhaps, is just as well. A world populated by wholly wise men and women might turn out to be a dull spot, after all."

"Then you mean," cried Shirley, her eyes and lips undisguisedly amused, "that if you were given charge of all the newly born babies you could make them all clever."

"Exactly. What a picture it presents to the mind! But . . . exactly!"

"And you still think there's hope for me?"

"I think so," he replied, shaking his head at her, with a smile of reproach, "although I am not sure that you have not over-fostered a sense of derision, which is not a part of wisdom, you know. But take

Joyce, now. When I saw her first she was fifteen, or a little less, I believe; like yourself, physically interesting, and still capable, so it seemed to me, of learning rightly. I was mistaken. I was too late. Before I finally decided this, I had patiently borne a great deal of the society of her extremely kind and hospitable relations—people who, otherwise, I should scarcely have pursued. In sheer politeness, I am compelled to frequent them still, at times; even though I gave up all hope of the child a good while ago. She is old—oh, so old! Will you believe that the only idea that she got (at fifteen!) of my efforts to draw her out of the ruck of the dull was that I was attempting to make love to her? . . . So I may be mistaken in you; but I am of a sanguine nature. Would you care to become the object of an experiment?"

"Honestly," Shirley protested, after some hesitation, "you're quite wrong in thinking me the least bit clever. I really know nothing at all, except how to make dresses."

"I have told you that that is all to the good. There is the old simile of the clean slate. But the mind, unfortunately, is neither a slate nor a wax tablet. It is a granite block, on which the lettering is cut to an indelible depth. By degrees it becomes filled from top to bottom and side to side, and there's an end. Now there is still plenty of space left in your mind."

"Plenty. It's nearly all space."

"Well, that's nothing to be ashamed of. It's hardly an advantage, surely, to work at high speed, and over-time, to cover the whole surface with false and vulgar inscriptions, like a grocer's grave-stone. Will you accept advice about its decoration?"

The girl was silent for a few moments.

"When we were talking about will—the last time we met, you know," she reminded him, "you told me that intellects varied. Now you say we're all born equally wise."

"Quite so. Intellect varies; and intellect is only a loose form of expression to describe the power, which may be acquired from experience or surrounding influences or both, of employing one's natural wisdom. Some force has already increased this power in you, while, at the same time, your innate germ of stupidity is still latent. But look at the Cassilis'! Content and convinced in their fostered blindness! What could one hope to do with them?"

As he ceased speaking, the winding path along which they had been slowly sauntering emerged into an enclosure at the end of the labyrinth most remote from the house.

"This is the place I wanted to shew you," said Sir Edward. "Shall we rest here for a little? Or are you bored with my chatter?"

CHAPTER III

THEY found themselves in a mere circle of turf, hidden by its dark walls from everything without, except the immaculate blue of the sky. A rough wooden seat was placed close under the hedge, and in the middle of the grass a term of grey stone, surmounted by a placid and bearded head, formed the genius of the place. Sir Edward halted in front of this battered image, his hands in his pockets, and contemplated it thoughtfully.

"You hadn't seen him before?" he asked.

"No. Who is he? Homer?"

"I should say not. He appears to be Silvanus. Once upon a time, long ago, he was erected over the bones of a sacrifice, and with proper ceremonies, on the outskirts of some Roman garden, and hung with garlands. He was an important member of that vanished household, Miss Cresswell; and fulfilled, with greater effectiveness probably, the duties of our 'trespassers will be prosecuted' boards."

"Then he's really Roman?"

"Undoubtedly. He was once my guest, and will shortly be again; for lately I have prepared a country home for myself. Meanwhile I had, for a time,

no suitable place to put him. The first time I visited this house, I said, when I wandered by chance into this grove: 'Here is the very shrine for which I have been looking for my friend.' So I offered to lend him to Mr. Cassilis for a while; and you will see from his benignant expression that he approves of his lodging."

"He's a nice old thing. Where did you get him?"

"He was dug up by a farmer in Somerset, at a time when I was in the neighbourhood; and I secured him for thirty shillings, plus sixpence to the labourer who brought him to my house."

"I suppose he's really worth more than that?"

"Yes. Shall we sit down?"

They took their places side by side on the bench, facing the image. The morning grew hot, and the thin, penetrating hum of flying insects made the air vibrate, but the blue shadow of the tall hedge protected the seat from the sunshine.

"So you see that there were great and wise civilisations before our own," said Sir Edward tritely. "May I smoke a cigarette?"

"Do. . . . Of course I know all about Rome and Greece—"

Sir Edward nodded, with a slight lift of his eyebrows, expressive of a gratified surprise.

"But surely," continued Shirley, "that old man with a beard isn't the best proof of how *wise* they were, is he? I mean, we don't hang wreaths on

statues nowadays, and trust our affairs to them, do we?"

"Don't we?"

"You mean Roman Catholics? I thought their images were just meant as symbols. They're not idols, are they?"

"And this is a symbol."

"Yes, but what of? They had heaps and heaps of gods, and they went on anyhow."

"Who is to lay down a standard of conduct for a god? Does the world strike you as being directed in the manner in which you would do it yourself?"

"But, Sir Edward, you don't really believe in the Roman idea of gods—Jupiter and Achilles and Aphrodite and all those?"

"I believe in various unexaminable forces that together make up the universe as our senses display it. It seems to me immaterial what names we give them: Elohim and Beelzebub, with his train, or Ormuzd and Ahriman, or the thousands of other labels that men have attached to them. Silvanus Orientalis here formed part of a pretty old and wise belief; and wisdom is older than the hills, and is constantly being lost, rediscovered and lost again."

"Then do you think the Romans were wiser than we are?"

"That is to cast too wide a net. Rome was sometimes startlingly wise, sometimes unimaginably silly. I am speaking of the scholastic average of knowledge,

of course. There are wise individuals in all ages, even the grossest. As far as we are concerned, we are, to my mind, just rising from one of our lowest falls, and slowly beginning to work our way up the slope once more. This I should venture to say: that Western Europe was further advanced four hundred years ago than it is to-day."

"Was it really?" cried Shirley, her lips parted and her eyes dilated. "Haven't we made a lot of wonderful discoveries lately, though?"

"They were equally wonderful the last time they were discovered."

"Oh, I know! The Chinese! They always discovered everything six thousand years before we did —gunpowder and compasses and suspension bridges. I used to think they were the most tiresome people, and dreadful liars, too."

"I wasn't thinking so much of the Chinese, although many of their claims are demonstrably true. But take one of the very basic facts of the universe—the radio-active energy. What is being laboriously pieced together in our days was not only known but controlled centuries ago. The wise men who had the secret, however, dared not share it with the mob. If we have lost in knowledge lately, we have at least gained in tolerance—probably in consequence. Tolerance is the virtue of the supremely wise and the profoundly ignorant; and in the days of which I speak vast numbers of men were in the search for

knowledge, and bitterly hostile to opposing schools of thought. So the great secret was hidden away; fondled in hiding by the comparatively few; and a ridiculous, pseudo-scientific conception of the universe was constructed, which at one time it was rank heresy to doubt, but which has been blown into fragments by the partial exhumation of the old wisdom."

"I don't know much about radium. It's got something to do with X-ray photographs, hasn't it?"

"You would be in tears if I attempted to give you a lecture on radio-activity; and so should I, at the sight of your martyrdom. But this you certainly know: if there was one sheet anchor in which the scientists trusted until lately, it was the stability of the atom, wasn't it?"

Shirley nodded, wide-eyed.

"The whole of their theories was held by it; and now the cable has parted. We know that everything changes, endlessly and inevitably; that variations are not due to mere rearrangement, but to actual transformation of constituents, proceeding from a force that lurks within every atom; that we can pin our faith to no material thing; that uranium becomes ionium, ionium radium, and so on. We can imagine no limit upwards or downwards to these metamorphoses. Some have guessed that the entire process is a mere circle, though too vast to be conceived; and that agrees well enough with the views of certain

geometrists who have, in recent times, questioned the authority of Euclid, and conceived a spherical universe, beyond the limits of which human reason and imagination can never travel. . . . Well, these things are taught in the schools in our time, but the men who knew all this and much more, some centuries back, would have been burnt if they had not kept their lips shut. They knew; they even employed their knowledge in a way still impossible to our modern scientists. No doubt you have laughed, yourself, over the wild tales of those who transmuted the baser metals into gold; or who tore the vital energy from the heart of the elements and absorbed it into their own bodies. Miss Cresswell, those stories were true."

"But how can you possibly know?"

"Secrets have a way of surviving. I know more than that; I know of many things that have not yet been accorded a pompous public ceremony of unveiling. All these theories of natural science merely touch the surface. They are convenient working hypotheses; they are handy, like the mathematical symbols; they are not the truth."

"I don't *quite* follow that."

"Take an instance. It has been suggested that our world is about a hundred and ten million years old, geologically. But the world is an instant—nothing—eternal."

"Oh dear!" cried Shirley despairingly. "Then what *is* true?"

The flying insects hummed and circled about them as Sir Edward smilingly contemplated her confusion.

"That's hardly a thing that can be explained in a morning's talk, nor to an unprepared mind, however receptive."

"Can't you give me some sort of hint?"

"I could give you many, but they would probably only worry and weary you. What you have to decide is: do you want to know the truth? Or, rather, to be put on the path that leads to it?"

"Of course I do."

"You say that without reflection. Remember that far the greater part of mankind has died without having a glimpse of it, and many of them have got a good deal out of life."

Shirley considered this proposition for a time, with her eyes on the ground; while Sir Edward watched her with an expression almost of tenderness on his smooth face.

"That's true," she said presently. "Perhaps it may be better to live in an imaginary world. . . . What do you think?" she concluded, looking up at him suddenly.

"Do you really want my advice?"

"Please!"

"It's prejudiced, you understand."

"I'm not obliged to follow it, am I?" she pointed out, her solemnity relaxing.

"Then, in your place, I should choose to know all I could. More than that, I myself am anxious that you should."

"Why?"

"If you were going carelessly through life, like Lovat or Joyce or her mother or even her father, then I should not attempt to influence you one way or the other. It would be a matter for you to decide unaided. But you are not happy, or only happy in patches. The blows that you have taken from fate have left their marks. You have an unusually sensitive nature; your eyes, your mouth, your voice, your hands, the texture of your skin, all proclaim that. The question is: can you forget, as less highly strung people forget? Or, in any case, will it not be a long and sorrowful process? I am profoundly interested in you, Miss Cresswell. To what is loosely called a mystic, like myself, you radiate a curious personal charm quite unconnected with, and in addition to, your physical beauty. I should like to see you happy."

His tone was dispassionately gentle, and the girl acknowledged his sympathy with a swift look of gratitude.

"You think that if I knew more I should be happier?"

"I know that if you had the inclination and pa-

tience to learn enough, you could be entirely happy."

"That sounds too good to be true. Why doesn't everyone learn, if that's so?"

"Everyone isn't given the chance. Those who know much are not necessarily philanthropists. And most, as I told you, are unable to learn, even if they get a chance; for it generally comes too late. But you, I am pretty sure, can learn if you like."

"I wonder. . . . You told me in London that, if I let you, you could teach me to forget what I wanted to, and to feel as I liked to feel, but I didn't understand then that it would be by being let into secrets about the world. I thought it was only by exercising my will—by pretending that everything was all right, like the Christian Scientists. You said (didn't you?) that their ideas were true enough, as far as they went; but that there was another sort of Christian Science that you'd explain to me some day—ethical, was it?"

"You remember me perfectly. But don't speak of the Christian Science method as that of pretending to be well, and so being, or getting, well. According to them, it is the exact contrary; realising that sickness is an illusion, that, in fact, one is pretending to be ill. That, however, is equally untrue. Health or sickness, quietude or pain, are merely the result of a deliberate choice. You can have which you like. To-day you are wearing that very pretty white dress;

yesterday, when you arrived, you had an equally pretty one of blue. When you dressed this morning, you did not say 'Let's pretend that my blue dress is white,' or: 'I was deluded yesterday into believing that this white dress was blue.' You chose the one you wanted to wear, and put it on."

She wrinkled her smooth forehead faintly.

"I see. . . . And what about the ethical part of it? What *is* ethical, exactly?"

"Shall we say the rule of conduct, the idea of Good and Evil, you know?"

"You mean that one can choose to do right or wrong? But we all do that."

"No, no. You misunderstand me. We can choose whether we will make what we are about to do right or wrong."

"But that's the same thing."

"Surely not. Let's assume an absurd instance. I contemplate killing Mr. Cassilis, for no reason, or because, perhaps, I dislike his habit of snorting, which I certainly do. If Lovat did the same action he would be wrong. If I did it, I could make it right."

"That would only prove that you thought more of yourself than Captain Lovat does. I suppose most murderers think they were quite right to do their murders."

"Doubtless; but they are often mistaken. In my

case, it would not be a question of personal prejudice. The killing would be right. I should have made it right beforehand."

Shirley shook her head.

"I don't see that a bit. Besides, what would be the good of it? They'd hang you just the same."

"No."

"You mean that you could persuade them . . . ?"

"There would be no need for persuasion. Why should there be? One is hanged for doing evil, not for doing good. At least, that's the theory."

"Sir Edward! Do you mean to say that if I had enough will—or knowledge, or whatever it is, I could go and steal half the Crown jewels to-morrow morning, and everyone would agree that I was quite right; and that if Mrs. Cassilis stole the other half in the afternoon, they'd send her to prison?"

"Roughly, that is so."

"But that's really altering the whole course of nature."

"Exactly."

"Nothing's real . . . is that the idea? It's only a sort of dream, and we can learn to dream what we like?"

"Not quite that either, although something like it. We are all world-creators; but most of us create blindly. The stuff is all ready to our hands, without form; and the unskilful compound it into shapes that

partially please and partially disappoint them; and the few achieve masterpieces."

"It sounds to me—I know I'm silly, and don't think I mean to be rude—but it sounds to me quite mad," Shirley sighed hopelessly. "Anyhow, I should think it's rather a dangerous sort of belief—immoral, isn't it? A few of us could go rushing about killing people and taking their money and running off with their husbands and wives; and, however little the others enjoyed it, it would be all right, because we said it was."

The man laughed at her fractiousness.

"I agree that it sounds rather like the Saturnalia; but I warned you that the subject was practically impossible to set out clearly in a short talk. Notice this, however: it couldn't possibly be described as an immoral philosophy. To do right is not immoral."

"Please! I'm so confused."

"Let's leave that side of the question, then. In broad terms, you see the general effect on one's personal lot; the power to control fate absolutely, and to make one's experiences whatever one chooses. Do you consider that that offers sufficient inducement to study the matter a little further? You can stop at any point you like; anywhere you feel you disagree, or instinct, or prejudice—yes, or superior wisdom, perhaps—tells you that you are on perilous ground. You understand that all this talk about murders and what not is only for the purpose of letting you see,

through extreme and even burlesque illustrations, what powers are within man's reach. The supreme object would be happiness; absolute personal contentment; raptures that are inconceivable to most of us."

"It sounds lovely," Shirley agreed. "How *does* one learn? Is it frightfully difficult?"

"Neither difficult nor easy. It is a simple question of personality. But nothing is lost by discovering whether you have a suitable one."

Shirley put back her shoulders, and sat more upright, looking out over the stiff line of the hedge-top at the stainless sky. A returning smile came and went at the corners of her mouth.

"What do I have to do? Go to lectures? I don't much like lectures."

"God forbid! You would have to talk to me, or, if you prefer, to others who have the knowledge to a greater or less degree. Further. . . ." he paused, and looked at her with a kind of sternness that banished the smile from her face, "further, there are certain concessions that must be made to the human mind. The craving for symbolism and ritual is deeply rooted in our natures. They form an essential part of metaphysical instruction. They often triumph where mere logic is bound to fail, because they make an appeal to profounder gifts than the faculty of reason. This question of Good and Evil, for instance . . ."

"I was thinking of that while we were talking about it," Shirley interrupted intelligently. "I suppose you'd say that there's no such thing scientifically, as either. Of course, I can't help fancying there is, but then I haven't got a scientific mind."

"And you are perfectly right. You have forestalled my very words. Logically one can place beyond all possible doubt that the conceptions of right and wrong are only based on variable social convenience; that any eternal, world-wide, immutable standard must be an absurdity. And, while we prove it, our whole nature rejects the conclusion, in defiance of our reasoning minds. How then are we to approach the knowledge of these two great opposing forces? Through the emotions, stimulated by a suitable ritual."

"So Mrs. Cassilis was right when she told me, last night, that you had started a new religion?"

"A new religion is not an accurate description. The materials of which my belief is built are probably much the same as your own, although the completed construction is different. I am not trying to lead you away after false gods. Don't think that. Your God, the Almighty One, is mine also; your Devil . . ."

"Oh, but I don't believe in *him*," she cried defiantly.

"The powers of evil exist; be sure of that. How can you look about you and doubt it? But they are

slaves, not lords. You need not fear—or possibly hope—that my object is to persuade you to transfer your allegiance from the master to the servant, as certain sects of mystics are reported to do. My followers do not attempt to enter into bargains in which their souls are the purchase money or consideration; and I suppose I need hardly tell you that no man has been held bound by such a contract since the world began."

"Of course not," Shirley agreed, risking a laugh. "So you have followers, then?"

"Let's call them associates. We are all on the road; some in front, some behind. None of us have arrived. I make no claim to be in the very forefront, although my nearest competitors seem to wish to give me the first place."

"Who are they? Anyone I know?"

Sir Edward hesitated; and when he spoke again his voice, face and manner had discarded a certain glowing and sombre exaltation which had begun to make itself manifest.

"For various reasons I never mention names in this connexion. Every one of us has necessarily a commonplace side to his life, from which he prefers to keep his spiritual experience separate."

"You don't like your friends to talk about this belief of yours?"

"I am quite indifferent; it doesn't affect me. Please don't imagine that I am going to extract a

vow of secrecy from you, or that there is anything underhand or insincere in our proceedings. You will be quite at liberty to talk about them to anyone you like; or to send an account of them to 'John Bull,' if you prefer. In practice, however, I find that initiates are disposed to keep their own counsel. Such subjects are hardly suitable for small talk, are they?"

"No, I see that," answered Shirley; and the pair fell into silence. The sun had found them out in their hiding place, and Shirley opened her white sunshade. From under the edge of it she kept glancing doubtfully, almost humourously, at her companion who, in his smartly cut flannels, with his big, smooth head bare, his shaven face tranquil and uncompromisingly modern, and his illegible eyes watching the blue and brown wreaths of tobacco smoke, looked particularly unlike the prophet of an occult sect. Presently he dropped his regard unexpectedly on the girl, and spoke as if in reply to a remark.

"Yes; it all sounds very absurd; and it *is* absurd, if it's approached frivolously or even apathetically. Go into it out of inquisitiveness, teased with the itch to mock at anything serious which is almost universal at present, and you may get a certain amount of laughter out of the thing; but you could get more, with greatly less expenditure of time and money, by going to see Harry Tate sell his motor-car."

"Oh, I wouldn't do that," she apologetically protested. "You say I needn't go on, if I find it worries me, or I can't understand it?"

"Dear me, no! Some never get beyond their novitiate; some never even reach initiation; they are given an indication of what lies before them, if they choose to go on, but no more. Only a few attain the higher stages. Most get out of their depths in time; or for some reason I don't feel inclined to take them further. At any moment you are perfectly at liberty to retire from the adventure, with as much or as little knowledge as you happen to have gained."

"I'm afraid I shouldn't get far."

"That's difficult to foretell. But I feel—and this, you know, is the only reason that I have said so much to you after so short an acquaintance—I feel somehow that you could reach the front rank if you cared to do so. So far, you have tried to jeer your troubles out of existence, to treat everything lightly and carelessly. You've been grievously hurt, and you think that laughter is the salve for your wounds. Real laughter is to some extent anodyne; but yours is not real. Laughter based on incredulity and despair cannot be real. It is bitter; and bitterness cures nothing."

"No," she confessed in a low voice, looking down at her lap, like a scolded child. Sir Edward turned to her quickly and took her hand lightly in his own.

"I want you to believe in something," he urged, with an almost passionate instancy. "Anything—wisdom, an ideal, love, God—anything that will lift you out of this wretched business of setting the teeth and shutting the eyes and waiting for the end. There is no end. There is all life and eternal life before you. But to waste even a day over a useless and painful treatment of your sickness is tragic. Will you try my way? You must see that yours has been a failure. Will you see if mine suits you better?"

"There's no harm in trying," she said, with obvious reluctance. "But I'm afraid. . . ."

"Stop!" he said smilingly, still keeping hold of her hand. "You musn't start off in that spirit. If you can't, for the moment, feel confident, which I could hardly expect, at all events keep an open mind. A very short trial will be enough to persuade you whether there is any hope in the new prescription or not."

"It's kind of you to bother about it," murmured Shirley, without looking at him. "And I do feel pretty beastly, at times. . . . When would you find time to teach me, though? You know, I'm at work all day."

He released her hand, shook the ash from his cigarette, crossed his legs, and spoke in the kindly, formal manner which he had used at their first meeting.

"Yes. I should imagine that you might do a good deal by yourself, in your spare moments."

"Books?" There was a note of apprehension in her voice.

"Books; varied by conversation, when you could spare me an hour or so. Don't look alarmed. I think that, in your case, the preliminary study might be cut down fairly low, though some is essential, I'm afraid. To your nature emotion is more suggestive than argument. If you will give me your address in London, I'll let you know shortly what I propose for you. First of all, though, tell me frankly what makes you contemplate exhibiting my remedy."

"I won't do that," she assured him. "I won't let anyone see it, truly."

"I'm sure you wouldn't, although I've told you that you're quite at liberty to. What I should have said was: Why are you inclined to take advice from me? I can see that the idea of a ritual presided over by me not unnaturally amuses you a little. Is it merely an appetite for new sensations, or have you really a feeling of hope? And, if so, why?"

She pondered.

"Well, I don't quite know, but I have; and I didn't mean to be amused. You see, one doesn't often come across a person who takes anything seriously; at least, they're ashamed to say so, if they do, until they've known you for years. So I wasn't quite sure whether you were laughing at me, or not. . . .

And it isn't only inquisitiveness, although I *am* inquisitive, too. New things, particularly if they're odd or a little uncanny, always thrill me a good deal. But, besides that, I do feel that you may be able to help me to fuss and bother myself less. Of course, you're clever, and you look so sure of yourself and calm and contented. I should like to feel like that. Nerves and depression are horrible. Do you think there's any real cure for them, or must they just be lived down?"

"With good will, you shall be as impervious to trouble as myself, before many months; so you see that, even if you choose to stop at that point, you will have gained much. But you will go on. I know it."

He threw his cigarette under the hedge, and rose from the seat.

"We'd better be getting back to our hostess, I suppose," he said with a polite regretfulness of tone. "She won't forgive me if I monopolise you for the whole morning; moreover, I have lectured you enough, goodness knows, for one day. You've borne it with exemplary patience. I can see that you'll be the best of pupils; and it shan't be my fault if you don't live to be glad of it."

During the return to the lawn, he said no more on the subject of their long duologue, but talked pleasantly and at random of more commonplace matters. Mrs. Cassilis, still seated in her wicker chair,

had dropped her novel, and was laughing at some frivolity of Billy Lovat's. Joyce, on the grass at her feet, was idly peeping into the pages of the discarded book. Her father had gone indoors, and his place was occupied by Magdalen, who lay back in what appeared to be her habitual condition of amused semi-somnolence. She looked up as the pair of newcomers approached, and seemed to note their association with an increase of attention, which narrowed her pale eyes queerly. Then lifting her eyelids, she turned a glance upon Sir Edward that was almost a question; one, however, to which he gave no perceptible reply. There was nothing in his face to shew that he had even been aware of the mute enquiry. Smiling on the party, and laying two fingers momentarily on Shirley's forearm, he made his apology.

"I'm afraid I've been very selfish about Miss Cresswell; but it is entirely her fault. She interested me so much that I was quite unconscious of the length of her captivity. However she's been very good, and has thoroughly earned her release. . . . Where's Gathorne?"

"Still in bed with a dreadful headache, poor fellow!" Mrs. Cassilis replied. "I sent up to ask him if we could do anything for him and he said 'no'; and he was afraid he wouldn't be down for lunch. Such a dismal way of passing a week-end in the country!"

"I'll go up and have a look at him," said Sir Edward, without any display of sympathy for the sufferer.

"Do. He sent down word that he couldn't see anybody; but, of course, that wouldn't apply to you."

"It was probably aimed directly at me," Sir Edward smiled, "but I shall go, for all that. He gives way, on these occasions; lets himself go altogether; and he'll probably lie there for two or three days starving and pitying himself, if I don't take him in hand firmly. I shall bring him down to lunch all right—you see!"

Still smiling, he wandered away towards the house, his large, well shaped head bare to the sun, his eyes unwinking in the glare. Magdalen had slipped from her chair to the grass beside it, and caught Shirley by the hand affectionately.

"Sit down here," she begged, studying the other's face with half closed eyes, in which laughter and admiration seemed to be at war with utter weariness. "What a gorgeous morning! I wish one never had to move again. May I lean my head against your knee, darling?"

Shirley agreeing to this arrangement with an amiable lack of enthusiasm, Magdalen dropped her flaming locks against the white of her friend's dress, with a comfortable sigh. For all her superficial cynicism, she seemed to have a foundation of sentimentality to her character; for by and by the scar-

let head turned slowly on the knee, and Shirley, who was at the moment speaking to Joyce, broke off and looked down with raised eyebrows as Magdalen pressed her lips to the hand which she held in her own. The crouching girl did not lift her eyes, however; but, having given this slow caress, fell back with another small sigh into her former position. Shirley glanced across at Joyce, who had been watching this pretty interlude, and they both smiled, the elder with mere amusement, the younger with manifest scorn.

CHAPTER IV

THE two young women encountered at the entry of Delbruck's in the second week in July. The day was sadly overcast, and an occasional chilly breath of air spoke of coming rain; but Magdalen was in festal array. Shirley, on the other hand, although as enviably clothed as became the representative of a noted firm of dressmakers, had taken the possibilities of the weather into consideration to some extent.

"Here you are! What luck to catch you!"

"How do you do?" said Shirley, submitting first one cheek and then the other to an enthusiastic kiss.

"Where are you off to?"

"I was just going out to get something to eat."

"Alone? That's splendid. I flew down here from Lord's, on a sudden inspiration, to ask you to lunch with me and come up to the match afterwards. My young brother's playing—Chris; I forget if you've met him; and I've got a 'rover' ticket to spare for you. Do say yes!"

"I'm afraid I can't possibly," Shirley lamented, opening her eyes wide. "I must get back this afternoon."

"But that's ridiculous. Don't you ever take a day

off? Besides, it's a part of your business duties. Lord's is one of our chief dress-parades; or so I'm told, though I haven't seen anything there so far that would cause any comment in the Brixton Bon Marché. Still, I'm sure the Brooks would have told you to go if they'd remembered it. Is Emily in? I'll go and explain matters to her."

"She isn't; I'm in charge; and we've a lot of appointments this afternoon. Really! I'm awfully sorry, but I can't come."

"You're a little pig. What about lunch, then? You've confessed you were going to have that alone, so you can't very well get out of it without making an enemy of me for life."

"But I can only spare such a very little time. It's hardly worth it, is it? For you, I mean," asked Shirley, looking up and down the street in a worried manner.

"I'll let you go whenever you feel you must," Magdalen promised, with a flattering eagerness. "Where do you usually feed?"

"I very often walk up to Selfridge's. . . ."

"Well, there you are! I can save you some time. Here's my taxi waiting, and I know a nearer place than Selfridge's. Oh, be nice, Shirley!"

"Of course, I should love to," the other explained, her troubled face relaxing into a politely grateful expression; "if you don't mind me running away directly afterwards."

"You're a nailer at dissembling your love," drawled Magdalen, smiling affectionately on the recalcitrant guest. "Jump in! Go to Ann Toyne's, Maddox Street," she added, in a new and convincing Cockney accent to the driver.

The man, apparently unconscious of her presence and voice, slammed the door of the cab on her, with a backhanded gesture, and put his foot on the clutch. Magdalen settled down in her corner, and took one of Shirley's gloved hands in her own.

"Do you know Antoine's? It's quite good, and it's quiet. I thought possibly Edward Talbot might have taken you there. It's one of his haunts."

"Sir Edward? I haven't seen him since I stayed with Mrs. Cassilis; and we'd only met once before that, you know."

"Very odd! I made sure that he'd have followed you about like Mary's lamb, these last three weeks. He was awfully smitten."

"He *wasn't,*" Shirley protested. "How can you talk such nonsense?"

"Of course he was. How could he help being? All Sunday morning alone with you; nearly an hour after tea; and drove you up to London next day, leaving the chauffeur behind! Yes, you may well look innocent."

"If you could have heard the improving things we talked about!"

"Oh, that's just the guile of the creature. It's

only stupid men who begin to flirt at once, and get themselves put down as triflers. A few geniuses kiss one on sight; and of course they're out and away the biggest successes; but I suppose Edward thinks he hasn't got the necessary means for that part. Besides, even the geniuses get snubbed sometimes; and he couldn't endure that. Never mind! He'll get more amusing before long."

"Probably he's forgotten my very existence."

"Because he's neglected you for three weeks? Don't you believe it. I know the great man. He moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform. Besides, the explanation's suddenly struck me. Probably he's getting into his new house in the country. I know it was ready, when we were at Overbourne. He wouldn't ask you to a house-warming party; he'd prefer to get you on some quieter occasion, when he could give you more of his attention. Oh yes! You'll give me news of him before long."

"All right!" Shirley patiently sighed. "Only please don't go telling other people that he's in love with me. They'd be sure to think that I started the idea."

"Oh no, they wouldn't," Magdalen assured her, covering her with her pale, sleepy eyes, and pressing her hand slightly. "Everybody's in love with you; young men and maidens, old men and children. However, I won't say anything. It wouldn't be

necessary; they'd all take it for granted. . . . Here we are!"

An orange tree in a copper-hooped tub stood sentinel on either side of Antoine's doorway, and his name appeared over the lintel in narrow gilt letters, a foot long; but the proprietor made no further public appeal. The sash windows on the ground-floor, with their curtains of lace and tapestry, might well have lighted the dining and drawing rooms of a private house. The front-door was open, but no silver-buttoned commissionaire guarded the entrance. Only a stout, grave man, in butler's undress, stood in the aperture, as if refreshing himself with a breath of air. This attendant ushered the two companions down the carpeted passage to the restaurant, a fair sized saloon, occupying the entire width of the building, and capable of holding sixty or seventy guests, if need be. The two front rooms of this floor were used for waiting purposes and the reception of outer wraps; kitchen, sculleries and dressing rooms occupied the upper floors, so Magdalen informed Shirley, while the basement contained Antoine's vaunted stock of wine. About a dozen lunch-tables were occupied, chiefly by pairs of friends; but not all could be seen at one time, a cunning arrangement of palms and folding screens securing a moderate privacy for those who desired it. The carpet was thick, the service commendably deliberate and noiseless, and the electric lamps softly shaded. The light was almost

wholly artificial, for the four windows at the back of the room, which presumably, when open, commanded a view of a yard or mews, were filled with coloured glass set in lead cames. The general effect, if not actually equivocal, was rather notably discreet, and seemed to have its influence on the company, which conversed, for the most part in confidential half-tones. An occasional plainly audible phrase or laugh came rather as a surprise. Magdalen and Shirley found places beneath one of the glowing windows.

"I come here when I've got someone with me that I want to talk to as well as look at," Magdalen explained. "When I don't want to talk to them, I go to the Carlton; and when I don't want to look at them, I go home and have a cup of tea in bed. So restful! . . . You'll have a Bron first, darling, won't you? Honestly? I will, then."

When the cocktail was set before her, she lighted a cigarette, and began to study the bill of fare idly.

"Shall I order? I think it's such a tedious job."

"Yes, will you?"

"What sort of thing do you like? Are you hungry?"

"Not frightfully. Anything that sounds nice."

A swarthy young waiter in black livery, with knee-breeches and white cotton gloves, stood silently at Magdalen's elbow, awaiting her commands, but the fact did not flurry her in any way.

"I'm simply ravenous. We breakfasted at nine—we're down at Hackhurst now, you know. Oh, didn't you? Yes; Phillimore Gardens is shut up till October. So stupid of mother to insist on going down just a week before Lord's; or, rather, inconsiderate, because she didn't want to go to the match, though she knew I did. I had to leave the house before ten. Chris wouldn't forgive me if I turned up late, dear old boy!"

At the momentary pause in her remarks, the waiter broke in, speaking in a tone of mystery, and bending his gleaming head low towards her.

"You like-a to start off with some Cantalupo melon?"

"It was quite cold, coming up," Magdalen continued, deaf to the suggestion, "and I've been sitting in the Mound Stand all the morning; so you can imagine if I want my lunch. . . . Well, what about some melon, my child? You're sure you like that? Or *hors d'oeuvre?* They've rather a pretty fancy in *hors d'oeuvre* here. Melon you think's nicer? Yes, I do too, really. . . . What fish? Or would you rather have an omelette? I think they're the most filthy compounds. Do have one! They can make you quite a little-y one, all for yourself."

"*Omelette aux rognons?* Wiz some kittanies inside?" the servant insinuated.

"My dear man, don't talk!" protested Magdalen. "How can I possibly think while you're talking? No,

we don't want any kittens. *Fines herbes.* . . . What did I order for myself?"

The labour completed, and a grey-haired dignitary having been sent in quest of a bottle of Sauterne, Magdalen swallowed her cocktail, put her elbows on the table, and sighed with the air of one who has aspired and achieved.

"Prize Gawd thet's done!" she said piously. "I say, it's ripping having you here. I hope you're enjoying it too?"

"Of course I am. I like this place; it feels so wicked. I wonder why. I suppose because it's so very quiet, and smells of lilies, and the waiters have such blue faces. . . . Are you going back to the country to-night, did you say? What time does the cricket stop?"

"Oh, it goes on for two solid days, you know, unless a riot sets in, Chris says. In which case, no doubt, all fastidious people would leave at once. . . . Yes, I'm bound to go back, because all the hotels in London are chock-full; but it's an awful grind, having to come up again to-morrow."

"Can't you shirk it?"

"My dear! And perhaps miss seeing Chris win the match by making a century or doing the hat-trick? I haven't the faintest idea what doing the hat-trick is. It sounds the sort of sport that circus clowns engage in; but it's constantly taking place in cricket, I know. Besides, I don't want to shirk.

No, I must face another early breakfast, and the rigours of the road. Who'd be a sister? But Chris is such an angel-lamb!"

Shirley leaned back in her chair, and contemplated such lunch-parties as were visible. At a neighbouring table, a stout moustached man of middle age sat opposite a slim, fair boy. Both were dressed in the extreme of fashion, and their meal, which they attacked in silence, was a complex one, judging by the array of bottles and dishes. As Shirley turned her head towards them, the boy laid down his knife and fork and stared at her intently. His companion, attracted by this sudden immobility, followed the direction of his eyes, and frowned when he discovered what the object of interest was. The girl immediately transferred her attention to a table straight in front of her, where a man and woman, both of Southern appearance, were murmuring inaudibly to each other, their faces as close together as the width of the table would permit.

"More incendiarism!" commented Magdalen, in her languid drawl. "That's boy's spell-bound. I'm sure I'm not surprised; you look too ducky in that demure little frock. If I was a man, I should be getting my lugger round to Port of London today."

"Oh, boys of that age always stare at every woman in sight. It shews what dogs they are. His father didn't seem to approve of his goings-on."

While she was speaking, Magdalen watched her slyly, between narrowed eyelids; and, when she ceased, gave a short, odd laugh.

"No. . . . Jealous, no doubt."

"That poor old thing, too? You are silly," replied Shirley genuinely amused.

The waiter putting two vast crescents of melon before them at this point, and adding silver castors, she was free for a few seconds to continue her discoveries. Her eyebrows suddenly lifted and her lips slightly parted; and, when the servant had retired, she leaned towards Magdalen, and spoke in a lowered voice.

"I say! I believe Sir Edward Talbot is sitting at the second table behind you, with another man. You can just see him, now and then, through the palm-leaves."

"Tell me when to look!" Magdalen did not seem best pleased at this encounter. "Yes, that's Edward, all right; and Gathorne's with him. Don't catch his eye, if you can help it. We don't want him coming over here and monopolising the conversation. You'll have plenty of him before long, you may be sure; and very likely I shan't have a chance of talking to you alone again before the middle of October. You don't mind, darling?"

"Not a bit. I don't care much for three-handed conversations. The other two always talk to each other, and I get left out in the cold. . . . He isn't

likely to see us, unless he leaves before us. He's quite hidden from me, except when he's sitting right back, like that, and I'm leaning sideways, to look round you."

"So you haven't lost your heart to him yet?"

"To Sir Edward? I thought him very interesting and nice, but not in *that* way at all."

"He'd be flattered to hear you. And yet I don't suppose he'd care, really. He can get most women to think of him in *that* way, if he wants to."

"I can quite imagine," agreed Shirley, in polite ellipsis. "But not me."

There was a little silence, during which Magdalen once more seemed to be scrutinising her friend's sensitive and faintly coloured face.

"Nor me. I'm not awfully interested in that sort of thing, are you?"

A slight shake of the head was all the reply.

"Men become so disgusting, somehow, when they begin to make love. Of course, on paper, Romeo and Cyrano said some ripping things; but probably even they had nasty red faces and hot eyes while they were saying them; and most men only have the faces and eyes, without the silver tongues. Edward's never tried his fascinations on me. He'd see at once that it was a waste of time and trouble. Or perhaps he didn't want to? I never thought of that. . . . Still, he's a thrilling creature."

"You mean his ideas are thrilling?"

"Partly that. Or, rather, it's one's own ideas—which one didn't know one had until he drew them up to the surface—that are so engrossing."

"I thought he seemed very kind and sympathetic."

"Oh, that be blowed! He isn't one of the brothers Cheeryble; he's a gigantic egoist—the completest that ever lived, I believe. And, like all egoists, he must pass on his opinions, or bust. He can't keep them corked up. Kind, sympathetic people are only pernicious; they encourage you to grovel and snivel—strew cushions before you, and lend you hankies. All clear thinkers are as cold as this melon and harder (I'm not going to pay for it) and so's Edward. If you're looking for someone to mingle your tears with, you might as well try to snuggle up with the Matterhorn. But if you want to know how to stop them, he's the boy."

Although Shirley's face shewed no great conviction that this estimate of his character was a true one, she did not dispute the point.

"He's really made you happier?"

"I was happy before I ever heard of him. I never went in much for low spirits. But since I've known him well. . . . Oh yes!"

She had plainly been going to say more; but, before speaking the last two words, she broke off unexpectedly, the enthusiasm that was beginning to light up her calm face faded, and she momentarily closed her eyes, with a faint shiver, suggestive of a disgusted

realisation of her unwonted want of reticence. When she completed the sentence, she became as lazily cynical as usual.

"You're great friends with him, aren't you?" enquired Shirley, beginning to eat her omelette.

"We were pretty thick for a time; but we don't meet very often now. I don't need him any more."

"How cruel of you! How do you know he doesn't need you?"

"He? He doesn't need anybody. So long as they find a use for him, they interest him. The moment they don't, they cease to exist for him, except as part of the landscape."

The statement had the effect of silencing Shirley for a while; and her eyes were thoughtful. When she spoke again, she hesitated over her choice of words.

"Suppose a person asked him to—asked his advice about things in general, you know; and didn't like it—wasn't inclined to take it, I mean, after all. Do you think he's the sort of man who'd be offended—who'd try to argue. . . .?"

"You needn't be discreet, darling," said Magdalen, coming to her rescue, and sliding a thin hand, on which a large acquamarine gleamed coolly, across the table-cloth, to press her friend's pale fingers. "Edward's offered to experiment on *you,* now—I knew he had, down at Overbourne; it was perfectly obvious—and you're afraid of letting yourself in for some-

thing tedious that you won't be able to get clear of without unpleasantness. Don't be alarmed. He'd no more dream of pestering you with unwanted advice than he would of making love to a woman who didn't enjoy it—not even if it was you. Why should he bother? He'd have no difficulty in booking himself up, a year or two in advance, for any part that he fancied would amuse him."

"You make him out quite a dangerous character," said Shirley laughing. "How old is he?"

"Oh, no age! Does he strike you as an old man?"

"Not old, no; but very dignified. I couldn't believe Joyce Cassilis when she told me that he used to try to make love to her. It seemed so utterly unlike him—as I saw him—to be running after a little thing of fifteen. I thought it was just a delusion of hers; in fact, something he said to me seemed to prove it was. But perhaps there was something in it after all. What do you think?"

"Quite likely," said Magdalen, shrugging her shoulders. "She's pretty enough; but so frightfully Philistine that nobody of any intelligence would be able to stick her long."

"Oh, I think she's a dear."

"Do you really? I tried to, for a time. But that manner! Can you imagine regarding her in a romantic light?"

"Lots of men do. She goes very well."

"Soldier boys and so on; yes, it's a fact. But I don't understand it. Captain Corrie told me once that he'd as soon think of kissing a naval Master-at-arms as Joyce; and, according to him, *they're* not what you might call sentimentalists. However, some people enjoy being rolled in the mud. The more you insult them, the more fascinating they think you. Personally I like girls to be awfully feminine—other girls, anyhow. That's what makes *you* so irresistible."

"Joyce has got a boyish manner," Shirley began, in defence of her absent friend.

"I never could see that she had any manners at all," Magdalen objected; but before the argument could proceed any further, a loud voice broke across the hushed murmur of the room.

"I'm damned if I do. . . . I'm damned if I do."

Shirley started violently; Magdalen looked quickly over her shoulder; and the two foreigners at the next table were also screwing their heads in the direction of this sudden outcry.

"I'll see you damned," the voice went on, in a gabble of fury. "No more! I'm fed with the whole damned thing. . . . I won't be quiet. You be damned! Who are you to tell me to be quiet? I'm damned if I'll be quiet."

With the harsh rush of angry words, complete silence fell on the assembly. Such of the lunchers

as could be seen were all staring the same way, some perturbed, some faintly smiling, some in offended protest. Magdalen turned back towards Shirley and raised her eyebrows in amused curiosity.

"Hullo!" she said softly. "'Ark to our Gathorne! What's gone wrong with him?"

"Is that Mr. Burrell?"

As Magdalen nodded, Gathorne's voice broke out afresh.

"Yes, you did! Yes, you did! It's a damned lie . . . you did!"

Ten, twenty seconds of noiseless calm succeeded, and then the subdued murmur of conversation, a trifle increased in vivacity, and the faint tinkle of glass and silver, filled the room once more. Sir Edward's voice had been wholly inaudible during the short controversy. Magdalen looked at her companion's face, which had blushed brightly at the first sound of Burrell's wrath, and immediately afterwards turned white.

"Why, you were quite frightened, darling," she said, laughing with a sort of tenderness.

"I thought—I was afraid there was going to be a row."

"Oh, nobody would dare to have a row with Edward; and Gathorne must be drunk to cheek him as much as he did. But you see Edward's suppressed him already; unless he accidentally dammed the flow of his own eloquence."

"I do hope he *isn't* drunk. I hate drunken people."

"He pretty often is, these times. But don't you worry. He's in good hands; he won't be allowed to make himself a bore. . . . I've been expecting something of this sort, for some time now."

"Why? I thought they were such friends."

"So they are, or were. Edward's as fond of him as he is capable of being of anybody. They were always together for a year or so. But Gathorne's rather a fool. He overdoes everything. When he's trivial, he puts in as much work at playing the goat as if he'd got to complete a contract against time; and when he's virtuous, which he is in patches, despite all efforts to keep him straight, he takes himself as seriously as Jeremiah."

"Jere-*mi*-ah?" repeated Shirley, with the faintly frowning glance at the ceiling which often accompanies an effort to fit a face and personality to a familiar name.

"So naturally he knocks his nerves to pieces. He looks pretty washed-out, and he's got a perfect genius for getting himself into hot water. . . . If you take a doctor's advice, you must take it whole, mustn't you? You must follow it more or less closely. If he prescribes a dose of digitalis, it's unreasonable to drink it out of tumblers every day for lunch, and then blame him if it makes you feel cheap. Or if he recommends a light diet, you're wrong in supposing

that he means you to go without food for a fortnight, and then try to balance things by overeating for a week."

"What doctor does he go to?"

"I don't think he's ever been to one in his life, so far. But, if he goes on like this, he'll need the services of two, and a certificate. . . . What would you like after that *noisette,* Shirley?"

"I couldn't eat anything else, truly, thanks very much. Besides, I must be getting back directly."

"Oh, not yet. Have a *zabajone?* They make them rather well. Just ten minutes more . . . do! I ought to be going too, then."

"*Really* ten minutes, then," Shirley stipulated.

"In which case, coffee, Giulio," Magdalen told the waiter. "No, don't describe puddings to us. Coffee, like lightning, and some yellow Chartreuse. Will that suit you, darling? No liqueur? Yellow Chartreuse, then; and the bill, at the same time."

She handed her cigarette case to Shirley; and, blowing a cloud of smoke herself, stared into her friend's eyes.

"I say! An idea's just occurred to me. I wonder if you'd be an angel-child, and do me a favour."

"What's that?"

"Put me up for the night. I do shy at the idea of the journey to Hackhurst and back. I don't want any meals. You can come and dine with me

somewhere; and I only have a cup of tea in the morning."

The proposal did not seem to appeal to the other girl, who replied with a troubled politeness.

"I'm so sorry. I've got such tiny rooms—just my bedroom and sitting-room and the kitchen. I really haven't got a corner for a guest."

"My dear, I'm not a guest. I can double up with you, or sleep on a sofa, or anything. . . . Oh, don't be formal, Shirley! It'd be such a lark. We could go to a theatre, or I'd get you into Murray's. Say yes, there's a darling! I'll be eternally grateful."

A conciliatory stubbornness took possession of Shirley's face.

"I would if I could, really; but, you see, I've had the most awful job to get a servant. Three deserted me in a fortnight, before this girl came along; and she looks like staying—she's been with me nearly a month. But I told her, when, I engaged her, that I never had guests, except perhaps one to tea or dinner, once in a way. . . ."

"But I shouldn't make any extra work. In fact, I'll help her to make the bed, if she likes."

"Yes, but you know what servants are, this last year or two. I'm sure she'd walk straight out of the place; and I really can't face looking for another yet."

"Give her an evening off then, and I'll do the housework," urged Magdalen; and Shirley, looking

supremely uncomfortable, shewed signs of surrender; but just then the voice of Gathorne came to her aid.

"I don't believe a word of it. It wasn't her at all, and you know damned well it wasn't. . . . It was a damned dirty trick. . . . Oh, go to Hell! I'm off; I've had quite enough of you."

There was the sound of a chair colliding with a screen, as the speaker thrust it away from him, and of a glass knocked into a plate. The head-waiter hurried to the table, and the murmur of Sir Edward's voice could be faintly heard.

"There! Take for my lunch out of that!" cried Gathorne loudly; and the next moment he stormed past the table at which the two girls were sitting, cannoned lightly off a dumb-waiter, and disappeared through the door. His face was as white as paper, and his eyes blazed; but he shewed no other signs of intoxication. For a few moments the *maître d'hotel* remained in subdued colloquy with Sir Edward.

"Thank goodness he's gone!" Shirley said, catching her breath. "What an awful temper he was in!"

She laughed nervously as she met Magdalen's eyes; but the other preserved an immovable countenance.

"Then you won't?" she persisted, returning to the subject of the interrupted discussion.

"I'm awfully sorry. I really darn't risk it. But I tell you what," hastily added Shirley, avoiding

Magdalen's sullen gaze, "why not ask Emily Brook? They've heaps of room at Bloomsbury Square; enough for a regiment. I can telephone her up for you, if you haven't time, and. . . ."

"I'm not going to stay with Emily. I can't stand her," Magdalen answered crossly. "I think you're beastly, Shirley."

Under the imputation of bestiality, Shirley again faltered; but at this moment Sir Edward, on his leisurely way out of the restaurant, perceived his two acquaintances, and approached their table. In his placid face and pleased half-smile of greeting there was no memory of the quarrel which had recently been thrust upon him.

"How do you do, Miss Cresswell? It's very nice to see you again. I have been trying to find time to call on you, for the last three weeks; but fate's been against me. Well, Magdalen. . . . You've been quarrelling, I see."

"Oh, no!" Shirley earnestly cried.

"And so have I, as I'm afraid you heard. I hope that your estrangement is not final, as ours was, so Gathorne informed me. What a noise he made about it, too, didn't he? Curious fellow! . . . Magdalen, I can't think you mean to be implacable towards such a sensitive person as Miss Cresswell."

The red-haired girl had already recovered her weary smile, and added to it a new touch of easy-going contempt.

"Oh, reassure yourself, Edward; there's no harm done. I haven't anywhere in London to sleep to-night, and I thought Shirley might give me a shake down; but she's afraid of her skivvy; so I shall have to get back to the country, after all. I'm up for Eton and Harrow, you know. . . . Shirley dear, if you really won't come to Lord's with me—you won't do anything to-day—shall I drop you at the shop on my way?"

"That would be awfully nice of you," Shirley replied with eager contrition.

"But I was just going to ask Miss Cresswell if she'd stroll there with me," Sir Edward interposed, his eyes on Magdalen's. "I very much want a word or two with her, if she could spare me a few minutes."

Shirley looked at her entertainer for permission to agree; and Magdalen withdrew her claims with perfect amiability. Any disappointment that she might have felt at Shirley's refusal of hospitality had passed away, to all appearance, as rapidly as it came. She received thanks for her entertainment with the friendliest protests, kissed her guest fondly, and, as she drove away, continued to wave her hand as long as she was in sight. Sir Edward's face softened into an amused sympathy with this maidenly tenderness.

"A pretty, attractive creature—Magdalen," he ruminated as he paced along, by Shirley's side, to-

wards South Molton Street, "but, I suspect, a little exuberant for your taste."

"I'm not much given to hugging and kissing my friends," Shirley confessed. "I suppose I've got a hard nature; anyhow, it makes me feel uncomfortably shy, particularly in public. But she's very kind and nice to me—I really can't think why; for we've only met a few times, and I can never think of anything to say to her. And she has heaps of clever friends, and is clever herself."

"Personalities take hold of us, quite apart from any intellectual affinity," Sir Edward abstractedly remarked. "I myself enjoyed an idyllic friendship of some months, when I was only a few years younger than I am now, with a young Frenchwoman who waited in a small restaurant in Charleston. She was a strong, square-shouldered, thick-ankled girl, with a pale, oval face—placid and kind, but by no means beautiful—and two queer dark corkscrew curls dangling at her cheeks. She knew nothing and had no conversation. I was very fond of her. . . . Poor Rose! . . . You have my full permission to laugh, Miss Cresswell. As you see, I am hardly the type of man that makes a habit of flirting with servants and barmaids."

"But I don't want to laugh. I think it was nice."

"Most of us feel at times the need of somebody or something to sentimentalise over a little, however

unsentimental we may ordinarily be. Magdalen has no sister, no intimate girl-friend, I fancy; not even a cat or a dog. She might, of course, have a lover, if she chose; but that is not the same thing. So she has made a little niche for the reception of your image. I should say that it is likely to remain empty, however. . . . And how have you been getting on? Have you thought any more of our talk in the grove of Silvanus?"

"Often."

"Are you still in the same state of mind? Am I to be allowed to help you?"

"It's very kind of you."

"No kinder than for a doctor to take up a case."

"But he gets paid for it."

"Not necessarily; and in any case, if he's worthy of the style of doctor at all, the essence of his pleasure lies in the cure and not the fee. For that matter, I shall be paid, and overpaid, by the privilege of your company."

The girl laughed at the compliment, but blushed a little at the same time. Sir Edward smiled good-humouredly.

"You think me dreadfully old-fashioned; and I myself, notice a tendency to a sort of ponderous formality in my speech. I think it must be an unintentional reaction from the brutality of manner which most of our young Englishmen have prided themselves on during the last few years. I must

try to strike a medium. Meanwhile, we are to be friends, I hope."

"I should like to be."

"Good! And, to begin with, shall we clear a tiresome obstruction to intimacy out of the way, and agree to call each other by our Christian names?"

"All right; but I'm sure I shan't be able to think of you as anything but Sir Edward."

"How very discouraging! One feels quite senile. Well, Shirley, you must please yourself about that. Whatever comes naturally to you will be what I prefer. And here is Delbruck's, where I suppose I must say good-bye. When can we have a long talk?"

"Will you come to tea, some Saturday or Sunday, about half past four? Or are you going out of London again at once?"

"I shall be up and down . . . Saturday is nearer than Sunday. May I come then? Yes, I have your address. And then we'll take the thing in hand seriously."

"I'm sure I shall be very interested."

"I think you will; and, if you are, I can guarantee that you'll be immeasurably happier. Till Saturday, then."

Shirley nodded pleasantly and vanished into the gloom of the private entrance; while Sir Edward, settling his hat with a slight shake of the head, retraced his steps, in grave thought, towards Bond Street.

CHAPTER V

OUTSIDE, in the hall, a meditative clock quietly recorded the hour of seven; and Shirley checked its accuracy with a glance at her watch-bracelet.

"I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to go before long," she said. "You won't mind, will you? I'm going out to dinner, and I shall have to dress pretty soon."

Sir Edward lay on a low divan beside the fire, watching Shirley with his expressionless eyes, as she sat in her arm-chair beside the small tea-table, her feet tucked under her. Upright on its haunches, with its fore-paws touching the fender, a sleek tabby cat stared unwinkingly into the dancing flames.

The room was of no great size, plainly and sparely furnished, its walls hung with a patternless paper of an indeterminate blue-grey. There were no pictures, pottery, polished brass or silver; no piano; not even a clock on the mantel, which bore no more than a cardboard box of cigarettes, and a few other trifles of daily use which seemed to have found their way there by accident. But the carpets on the floor and the divan, the heavy curtains which hid the window, the shawls which covered the two easy-chairs, and

Shirley's own robe of Chinese embroidery, smouldered and flamed with colour, and told of a passion for splendid fabrics, thrown up against an austere background. The effect produced was agreeably different from that of other London middle-class drawing-rooms, with their shiny furniture, gleaming mirrors and photograph-frames, trivial German china, negligible water-colour drawings, and more or less unclean and crumpled hangings and cretonnes. On the writing-flap of an open bureau there was a porcelain bowl of big yellow chrysanthemums.

The man shifted lazily on his couch, for the air was drowsy with silence, tobacco-smoke and the warmth of the chuckling fire.

"At once?"

"Oh no! Ten minutes, or quarter of an hour. That'll give me time enough."

"I was hoping you were free for dinner. I've hardly seen you, this last week. Where are you dining?"

"With Joyce."

"Joyce? . . . Put her off, and spend the evening with me."

"I can't very well. She's alone to-night. Mr. and Mrs. Cassilis are going out; and I promised her I'd come, three or four days ago."

"Yes? You're often with her, aren't you?"

"Fairly often."

"What do you see in her, if one may ask?"

"See in her? She's talkative and funny and cheerful, and she likes me."

"And that's all?"

"What else *does* one see in people?" asked Shirley, laughing. "Of course, I know that you want your friends to be clever. But then you're clever yourself, and I'm not. Hilarious idiocy's good enough for me; not that Joyce is idiotic, by a long way, except when she chooses to be. She's got twice my brains."

"Yet you and I are friends."

"Yes. I don't quite understand that."

"You don't?" He settled himself among the cushions, as if to make the most of his ten minutes. "Shirley," he went on, "do you never remember anything? You've lately achieved a degree of volatility that I should hardly have thought possible. I tell you a dozen times of the difference in quality between your nature and that of Joyce and her circle. You seem to understand me, at the time; and an hour later you come back to me with humble praise of the city sharpness which impresses commonplace people."

"I remember all right; but, you see, you've never really succeeded in convincing me that I've got anything in me, beyond a sort of instinct for dress; and sharpness is better than nothing, although naturally it's not as good as real cleverness, like yours."

"*My* cleverness, as you call it, can't amount to

much, if I'm so hopelessly incapable of judging you."

"But surely I must know myself better than anyone else can, even you. All the same, I think it's very nice of you to go on believing in me, particularly as you say that I'm not getting on anything like as well as you expected."

"I know you," he insisted, "far better than you know yourself; and I tell you that you're worthy of better company than that stupid little girl and her stupid little girl friends and her chuckleheaded boy admirers. As for getting on, you don't try to get on."

"Oh, I do!"

He shook his head amiably.

"I *do,*" she persisted. "And I have learnt a lot, considering. I'm ever so much steadier and happier since I knew you; and I'm awfully grateful. If you hadn't helped me, I should probably have made myself miserable for years over what's past. You can see yourself how different I am."

"My statement was that you don't try to get on, not that you didn't try to get on," he distinguished. "Up to a point, you were a good girl enough; and it seemed that my first estimate of you was absolutely right; but it wasn't. It never occurred to me that you were likely to give so much trouble—to be so unaccountably recalcitrant. You have the brains; you have the temperament; you appear to be as anxious to please as a puppy. And beneath it all lies a

strain of stubborn triviality which utterly defeats me."

"I'm so sorry," Shirley answered, with an ingratiating penitence. "I did warn you, didn't I?"

"Not at all. You said you were silly, which isn't true. What you really lack is pluck and energy. You find it less risky and exhausting to stick to the worn paths, however ugly and stony. At first sight I read more of the spirit of enterprise into you."

She hung her head mutely before this passionless rebuke.

"We've been fairly intimate now," he continued, "for over four months; and you agree that our friendship has resulted in giving you a less hopeless outlook. September and October pass. The introductory stages are past; I am just waiting for you to take the next step, when you suddenly pull up dead, and declare that you are not yet ready to go any further. To be sure, you're at liberty to drop your enquiries at any point you like; I've always admitted that. But you will neither say definitely that you don't want my guidance any more, nor follow where I try to lead you. If one has offered to take a friend to the top of Mont Blanc, one may be pardoned for objecting to settle down permanently at the Grands Mulets. The obvious alternatives are to finish the climb, or call the whole affair off. You trust me very little, Shirley; yet the mere fact of my persistence ought to reassure you. Beyond the pleas-

ure of watching your growth, there can be no possible reason for taking so much trouble. If I had not been fond of you, I should have given you up in despair before now."

As his cool voice ceased, the girl spoke with a hurried uneasiness.

"It's not you, it's myself that I don't trust. Whatever you say, I'm rather a fool. There's something in me, something I can't get rid of, which shies at once at any idea of taking anything too seriously. Even going to church, before I was grown up, used to embarrass me. It made me feel so silly to bow in the Creed, and wait with my face hidden, after the service, until I heard the rustle of people getting up, and eat bits of bread out of the palms of my hands, and all that. Of course, I know the real silliness is to think it silly; but I can't help it—that's how I'm made. I couldn't possibly say that I don't want your help and friendship any more, because I do. But I'm afraid I shall never be a credit to you; and honestly I think it would be better not to try to take me any further than I'm suited for; that is if you can bear me as I am."

"You must please yourself," he said carelessly. "I needn't apologise for saying that I should have liked you to go further, if you had felt inclined. I'm fond of you, and your company's been a great pleasure to me. So far as 'bearing you as you now are' goes, no doubt we shall go on meeting as friends;

but you will understand that, from my point of view, much of the interest will be knocked out of our association. Inertia does not appeal to me greatly; constant adventure seems to me the very salt of intimacy. It was almost wholly because I foresaw that I could rescue you from your condition of resolute hopelessness that I forced my acquaintance on you."

"Well, and I'm not hopeless now," she argued uneasily.

"You are neither hopeless nor hopeful. What you've learnt, so far, has been negative and destructive. You can see through many of the illusions and prejudices that spoil life for most of us. That is a necessary first step, but a short one. You no longer have to set your teeth to bear the pain, for you feel no pain; but, on the other hand, you scarcely feel pleasure. You are almost apathetic. I had hoped to make my friend more than merely callous."

"You're wrong; really you are. I enjoy myself lots."

"Why, you get a certain amount of contentment out of a book, a sunny day, a theatre—yes. That's not quite what I meant. The great emotions hardly seem desirable to you—triumph, love, fear and so on. At your age, with your possibilities, you have made comfort and peace your ideals. You avoid knowledge. Scepticism has become your god; though you still pay public homage to modern British morality. You are like some African convert to Christianity,

who still keeps his ju-ju at home for secret devotions. Many of the ideas that I have suggested to you in bare outline, you have privately rejected in your own mind, as unreasonably rebellious against the opinion of the majority. Oh, yes, yes! You don't realise what a tell-tale face you have."

"Some of them I didn't understand. So I couldn't *agree* with them, could I? But it was no more than that."

"Put it at that. You never will understand, unless you are willing to learn. Long ago I told you that reason is only one of the paths to knowledge. What shocks and surprises the reason may yet in fact be perfectly acceptable and desirable. My ambition was to give you energy as well as peace; to teach you to act, no less than to repose. I have come to the point at which the multiplication table and the rules of formal logic fail me; and there you elect to stop."

"Would you really rather—very much rather—I went on?" she asked pleadingly.

"You must please yourself," he repeated in his changeless voice.

Shirley's expressive eyes sought the emptily crystalline ones of Sir Edward in anxious enquiry; and for quite half a minute neither moved or spoke.

"You must please yourself," he said, a third time, smiling gently and returning her gaze.

"What am I to do?" she asked.

"Do?"

"Yes," she said fretfully. "There's some sort of a ceremony, isn't there?"

"Oh! So you've decided against stagnation? You're certain it's your own wish? Not merely a surrender to my disappointment? I couldn't bear to urge you against your inclinations."

"Yes," she said, still looking at him intently, while a touch of colour came into her cheeks, and her lips parted slightly. "Yes. Now I've begun, it'd be stupid and cowardly to stop, wouldn't it?"

"I congratulate you on your good judgment," he replied, with as near an approach to heartiness as his rather remote tranquillity could be expected to achieve. "And, selfishly, I'm very glad; for I own that I have looked forward greatly to you becoming one of us. There is something discouraging in the sight of so interesting a nature as yours obstinately refusing life, and clinging to a faithless indifference."

"How do I become . . . one of you?" Shirley again enquired, with so audible a note of nervousness that Sir Edward's expression changed to one of amusement. "I don't know what your . . . your services are like, in the least . . . what you do."

"Are you afraid, like Verdant Green, that you will have to submit to being branded with a red-hot poker? What a funny girl you are! Do I look like Torquemada?"

"I don't know."

"A very good answer. Nor do I; and, on second thoughts, I should think it's quite possible that he was my living image. Well, it comes to this: you must make up your mind whether you can trust me or not."

"Can't you give me some sort of idea of what happens?"

"Certainly. A number of us assemble in a suitable place and perform appropriate rites. You will attend as a spectator; and afterwards you will have an opportunity of being initiated yourself."

"But I needn't?"

"You needn't. I should like to suggest, however, that it would be better to stay away, unless you think there's a reasonable prospect of your wishing to join us. We are not running a variety entertainment, you understand."

"And that's all you can tell me?"

"That's all I can tell an outsider; and you are an outsider at present. You will see that you are not bound in any way."

After a period of downcast reflection, Shirley sighed.

"All right. Of course, I do trust you; it'd be beastly not to, when I know you so well, and you've been so nice. When will it be?"

"That I'll let you know in a few days. Perhaps in a fortnight or so, at my country place. I will ar-

range it for a Saturday or Sunday evening, so as not to interfere with your work; and there will be other women staying with me, to keep you company. This is a most pleasant surprise, Shirley; I began to make sure I'd lost you."

"Would that have mattered?" she asked, with a return of her dissatisfied manner.

He looked at her for some seconds without answering, and then laughed softly as he rose from the divan and came towards her.

"Very much indeed. . . . And now I see that I've exceeded my quarter of an hour, and probably made you late for your appointment. Good-bye!"

"When shall I see you next?"

"I'm not certain. Possibly not until we meet in the country; in which case I'll let you know all the arrangements by letter. You won't change your mind again? You will come?"

"Yes," she said obediently, "I'll come."

An hour later she was seated beside Joyce at one end of a long, shining mahogany table in the Palace Green dining-room, listening to her friend's appreciations of various common acquaintances. A little butler hovered, like a grey moth, about the brightness of the two girls, anxiously preventing them in all their doings; but his voiceless presence had no restraining influence on the incautious tongue of his employer's daughter.

"And those are the people that Mummy enjoys,"

she summed up scathingly, at the time when the servant was handing the coffee. "She isn't a bit odd herself, or if she is, I don't see it. . . ."

"Not in the least."

"And yet she likes to surround herself with monsters. I don't believe we've got anybody in our address book who hasn't a rat or two in the upper storey, except you, and a few boys that I asked here, and Daddy's business friends, who talk arithmetic all the time."

"Well, you know, I think myself that moderately crazy people are better fun than entirely sane ones."

"I don't . . . And most of ours are such outsiders, too. Now yesterday, for instance, Kitty Egerton came to tea, and brought a man with her—I haven't yet discovered who he was; some sort of middle-aged celebrity, who was by way of being an old friend of hers and her husband's—you know she only married that idiotic Egerton boy last June. Mummy was delighted to see him, of course; and he began to make himself useful by handing the tea-cake; and the plate was white-hot, and burnt him to the bone. I was rather glad; he was a red-faced, swimmy-eyed, over-smiling sort of creature. By-and-by Kitty was going to pick the plate up; and he sang out: 'Don't touch it, darling!' . . . Everybody sat up, and Mummy looked out of the corner of her eyes at old Lady Price, who's Arthur Egerton's aunt, who is supposed to be going to leave him her

money; but she didn't seem to have heard anything, and you could see everyone breathe again with relief. The fool of a man tried to make out he'd said 'boiling'; and went on, over and over again: 'Don't touch! It's barling—absolutely barling.' Kitty was the colour of a tomato, and giggled at everything that was said for the next ten minutes. The man left before she did; I suppose he thought it'd look better, after that; and Kitty began to suck up to Lady Price, asking her to come to dinner and meet some famous general or other—'Such a delightful man!' 'Really?' said old Price, with a ghastly stare. 'And does *he* call you darling, too?' . . . But it is rather the frozen edge, isn't it? Six months married, and doing the 'dear Arthur' touch all day, in public."

"Perhaps the man had known her when she was a child," Shirley charitably suggested.

"Perhaps he had. They called each other 'Mrs. Egerton' and 'Mr. Thingumybob'; but that may only have been a form of humour. . . . Then there was that girl from the Stock Theatre, that all the highbrows rave about. She came, too."

"Claire Trenchard?"

"No; the other—the comic one; Julia Crisp. Mummy begged her to recite something. I knew what it would be. She goes in for *too* delightful imitations of the Lower Classes. It always strikes me as about as clever as it would be if Rita Salomon was to give an imitation of a Jew. So when she'd

said: 'Oh, dear Mrs. Cassilis, I don't think I *could,*' once or twice, she sang a perfectly beastly song. It wasn't a bit funny; only blasphemous and disgusting. And there was Mrs. Lampson—you know; that frumpy old crone from Carlton House Terrace, who used to be at school with Mummy—jumping up and down in her chair, wrestling with Mummy to get away, and saying quite loudly: 'No, Adela; no, dear Adela, no! I cannot sit here and listen to such things. No, Adela dear, I can *not,*' poor Mummy all the time trying to persuade her, in whispers, that it was so quaint and so wonderfully clever, and begging her not to make a scene about it. Of course, she didn't really like it herself much better than Mrs. Lampson did; and she told Julia Crisp privately afterwards that it was rather a naughty little song, and she was afraid some of her friends were a trifle shocked. 'Oh, reaaally?' Julia Crisp said in that cold, offensive way of hers. 'It never occurred to me that I'd wandered into the company of people who were waiting to be shocked; or naturally I should have resisted your kind invitation to me to entertain your guests.' So she got the grievance for herself, and Mummy was quite apologetic. Poor darling! she's always so indulgent with anyone that she thinks is a genius. A week or two ago she discovered that Terence Soulis knew Batiste, that French composer, you know; and beseeched him to bring him along one evening, when she was 'at home,'

and introduce him. So Soulis brought him, in a filthy old tweed suit, and absolutely blind drunk; and he did nothing more interesting all the evening than sit on a sofa, and squint at us so horribly that I saw my own nose, for days after, just out of sympathy. Mrs. Simon, who's a Catholic, passed most of the time crossing herself; but Mummy was awfully flattered at him having come, though he couldn't possibly have known where he was; and when Soulis was helping him out, she thanked him warmly, and said how delightful it had been. And then there's Tristan Braun, who's really and literally barmy on the crumpet—he's been locked up more than once—and shouts and screams and breaks things when he begins to get excited. . . . You see, it isn't as if we only knew a few freaks. They simply swarm here: that revolting old Lewis, who's always talking about the ideal proportions of womanhood, and wanting to measure all the girls he's introduced to; and Edward Talbot—oh, I forgot! He's a friend of yours nowadays, isn't he?"

"Yes, I like him very much," Shirley stoutly affirmed.

"I wonder why on earth?"

Shirley laughed.

"He wonders why I like *you,* Joyce."

"Did you tell him? Well then, now tell *me* why you like *him.*"

"Because he's very clever and interesting and

kind. He's helped me a lot—How? Oh, with advice and so on. I don't mean that he's paid off bills for me."

"Does he make love to you?"

"Of course not! There's never been the faintest suggestion of such a thing, though we've met lots and lots of times."

"Oh? What's his game, I wonder?" Joyce speculated.

"Don't you believe that a man and woman are ever just friends, then?" Shirley asked, with a note of faint indignation.

"Yes, often. But Edward!"

"But what have you got against him? Only that he behaved rather stupidly to you when you first met him. Why, he was quite middle-aged then, and you were only fifteen. No doubt he thought of you as a small kid. Anyhow, I've probably spent far more hours alone with him than you ever have—you told me that he hardly says a word to you nowadays—and he's always behaved extraordinarily nicely and politely to me. If he was the sort of man you make him out to be, why should he waste his time on me at all?"

"I don't know; but I bet you'll find out before long."

"Joyce, you really are unfair. I can't think why you've got your knife into him, like this."

"I don't like his friends," Joyce explained, in the

intervals of a new meal of chocolate creams, which she had begun after finishing her coffee, "and I don't like his ears."

Shirley gave a distinct start, looked at her friend gravely for a few seconds, and then smiled again.

"That's odd," she said. "Do you know? I couldn't get over them altogether, for a little. I hate anything wrong physically, don't you? But after all, this is a very small thing, hardly noticeable. I never think of it now. And, in any case, I never heard that short ears had a bad effect on one's morals. Pan and his satyrs and centaurs had unusually long ones, hadn't they? And none of *them* were any good. . . . Father used to tell me a story once, I remember, of Pan's secret about his ears being given away by someone or other to the reeds beside the river which they both lived in. He had to tell someone, you see, or something; because he was the only person who knew, and couldn't keep it in. Of course he thought the reeds were quite safe; but they turned into a nymph, called Daphne, who was so frightened at what she'd heard that she ran away to Jupiter for protection, and he turned her into a bird—a swallow. I'm not quite sure what happened after that; but I think the two gods had a sort of musical competition for her—the one who played the lyre best, to get her; and one of them skinned the other alive—I don't remember why."

The recollection of these old-world stories was clearly pleasant to Shirley, for her eyes grew dark with interest.

"All the same, I hate his ears," Joyce persisted, "and I don't like the people he's always about with any better."

"You mayn't like them; but you don't know any actual harm of them, do you? They strike me as rather an affected set, that's all; and Sir Edward's not even affected."

"But that's *not* all," the younger girl maintained; and paused, for some moments, in thought, before adding, with a sudden frown and a reddening of the cheeks: "I'm going to tell you something that I never meant to talk about to anybody. But you ought to know it, before you get too thick with Edward."

"What?" cried Shirley, in quite a panic-stricken way.

"You remember Gathorne Burrell, down at Overbourne?"

"Of course; and I've seen him since, though he hasn't spoken to me."

"He used to be nice, when Edward first brought him to see us," Joyce continued, with a dogged defiance of voice and face. "He behaved decently and amused us all; and he seemed to want to be friends with me. And then he's still very good-looking, don't you think? . . . Beast!"

"Why, what's he done?"

Joyce's round face grew even darker in colour, and her eyes blazed blue fire, while the pupils contracted to mere specks of black.

"I'm going to tell you. . . . He'd been getting horrid for some time; dull and bored and rude. Sometimes he was so odd that I wondered if he was all there; and now and again I've seen him half drunk. Still, we hadn't actually had a row of any sort; and after I made friends with Billy Lovat, I didn't bother much about him, or he about me. You remember what he was like at Overbourne—generally half asleep."

The other girl nodded, but refrained from interruption; and, with some obvious angry hesitation, Joyce continued.

"Well, soon after you were there, Edward invited Daddy and Mummy and me to stay with him. He'd just got into his new house. Have you ever been there?"

"No."

"It's rather nice—Georgian—on the side of a hill, with trees at the back and sides; and you can see the sea from the front windows, a mile or two away. I haven't any idea what direction it's in, because we had the car shut, going down, as it was raining; but I think Rye's the nearest town, wherever Rye may be. . . . Oh, I don't think I'll tell you, after all."

Apparently she had wandered off into these descriptive particulars out of unwillingness to approach the disclosure, and her courage now definitely failed her. The cry of outraged curiosity with which Shirley greeted her last words, however, gave her the necessary stimulus to complete the story.

"There were only a few people, beside ourselves: Gathorne and the Jacinth-Bumpus horror and a couple of Mrs. Somethings that I'd never seen before, both rather painty, and one pretty. It was awfully dull. There didn't seem to be anybody to talk to but Gathorne, and as I knew what he was like nowadays, I made up my mind to pass most of the time reading a ripping book of Mabel Barnes-Grundy's that I'd brought with me. However, Gathorne bucked up tremendously, soon after we arrived, and was really quite amusing. I was rather angry with him, the third day we were there, when he tried to put his arm around me while we were walking in the garden alone, after dinner. Still, I thought he was only ragging, so I just shoved him off and told him not to be a fool; and we went on talking ordinarily. . . . That night . . . you'll never believe this, Shirley."

"Go on," Shirley begged, with lips and eyes of anticipatory horror.

"I'd gone to bed. I'd been asleep," Joyce continued hurriedly, frowning at the finger-glass before her. "My room had two doors, one on to the

passage, and one into another room—I didn't know whose, but it wasn't either Mummy's or Daddy's. They were on the floor below. The key was on my side, and I tried it, the night I came, to make sure the door was locked; and it was. I'm pretty sure I tried it again the next night, too, but, I wouldn't swear. I had a nightlight, as usual, on the washing-stand. . . . I don't know what time it was, when something woke me up with a start, and I sat up in bed. The door into the next room was opening."

"Joyce, how awful! I should have died."

"I was pretty terrified. It opened quite slowly, and Gathorne put his head in, and nodded at me and smiled, without saying anything. I called out: 'What is it? What's the matter?' and he only screwed up his mouth as if he was saying 'Ssh!' and then smiled again and came right into the room. He looked half foxed; but, what was far worse, he seemed to expect that I should be glad to see him. That frightened me so that I skipped straight out of bed, in my pyjamas, and ran at him saying: 'Get out of my room at once!' He tried to hold the door for a second, but I told him I'd yell the house down if he didn't let go; so then he did, and I slammed the door on him, and felt for the key. It was still there, and I locked the door, and shoved a lot of things up against it, and did the same to the other door, and got back into bed to think. First I

thought I'd go and sleep with Mummy. That would have meant telling her all about it, and—I don't know—I wasn't up to it; not that I cared about getting that beastly devil into trouble, but I didn't feel I could ever tell anybody. . . . Filthy, horrible swine! . . . I couldn't go to sleep again all night, though I wasn't really afraid of him coming back. But just remembering what he'd looked like made me feel sick—red in the face and rather mad and awfully pleased with himself. He had on yellow pyjamas. . . . If Billy Lovat knew about it, he'd kill him."

"But what happened next day?"

"Well, I dressed as soon as it was light, and sat at my window; and, about half past eight, I saw Gathorne come into the garden alone. I was so furious at the sight of him that I ran straight out of the house, and caught him crossing the lawn. I said: 'If you don't clear out of here before breakfast, I'll tell everybody at the table about last night.' He stared at me, as if he thought it was all a joke; so I told him: 'I mean it; and don't you ever come near *our* house again, either, if you want it kept dark.' He still went on smiling in a maddening way, so I said that if he'd meant it as a rag, it wasn't the sort of rag I'd stand; and I thought he was a disgusting cad, and I'd never speak to him again. Then he did look a bit flustered and puzzled; and what do you suppose he said?"

"I can't imagine."

" 'Why'd you left the door ajar, then, and a light burning?' "

"Do you mean he actually dared to hint that . . . ?"

"I don't know. But I told him that he was a liar, and he'd better not turn up to breakfast. As I was going away, he tried to catch hold of me and say something else; but I hit him on the nose, and he let me go. Sure enough, we didn't see any more of him before we left. Edward said he'd been suddenly called away to London. He hasn't been near us since."

She drew a long breath, pushed back her straight yellow fringe, as if emerging from a dive, smoothed it down again, and began to nibble at a chocolate, while the bright colour faded from her forehead and neck.

"What a brute!" Shirley indignantly sympathised.

"So now you see," Joyce warned her.

"What? Oh, Sir Edward! Why, how's he any more to blame for Mr. Burrell's behaviour than—well, than your father, for instance? They're both friends of his."

"I'm perfectly certain it was all Edward's fault."

"Joyce, *dear!* How could it possibly be?"

"I believe Gathorne was a decent enough fellow, before he knew Edward."

"You *believe!*"

"Lots of people have told me so. Besides, look at Edward's other friends! And that's not all. Just before I left him in the garden, he was muttering something about: 'Who did leave it open, if you didn't? Edward was sure you would one night, before long.' "

"You mean to say you'd believe such a creature as that, after the way he'd behaved? Of course it was just a mean attempt to shift part of the blame on somebody else."

"Why did Edward put us in rooms that communicated?" Joyce argued. "There are plenty of rooms in the house. I should think half of them were empty. And who did open that door? I'm sure it wasn't Gathorne; I believe he really was surprised to find it open—not that it's any excuse for him, of course. . . . Oh, I know I can't prove anything; but I'm as certain as I sit here that Edward arranged the whole thing."

"How can you talk such nonsense?" protested Shirley. "What in the world should he do it *for?*"

"I don't know. Perhaps he's always had a grudge against me for not being much interested in him. He's frightfully vain."

"Well, I think you're very unfair and bitter about him. Mr. Burrell behaved revoltingly, and I'm quite sure Sir Edward would be as angry with him as anybody, if he knew. . . . In fact," she added, with a sudden expression of reminiscence, "I know they

have quarrelled. Perhaps Sir Edward does know. They were sitting near me at a restaurant, a long time ago now; only a few weeks after I first met them; and they had an awful row, and Mr. Burrell sprang up and stamped out of the room in a rage."

"Oh?" said Joyce curiously. "Did you hear what they said at all?"

"Only a few words. I don't remember anything."

"Perhaps it *was* about me," Joyce ruminated. "If it was, probably Gathorne was blowing up Edward for getting him into a mess."

"Oh Joyce, you really are ridiculous! You've got quite a mania on the subject."

"All right!" Joyce surrendered, shrugging her shoulders with a sort of angry resignation. "All I know is that nothing would persuade me to go and stay in his house again; and if you've got any sense, you won't trust him farther than you can see him."

"I trust him entirely; and I'm going to stay with him in a week or two."

"You're *not?* Alone?"

"Alone? Of course not. He's having a party, and I'm asked."

Joyce looked genuinely uneasy.

"Honestly I wish you wouldn't. I hate that man."

"I know you do; but I know him very well, and like him."

"But truly he hasn't any sort of reputation. Everybody sniffs at once, when they hear that a girl is a friend of his."

"I don't care a bit about that. I'm not going to give up a good friend just because people sniff—which is a nasty trick, anyhow."

"What's the matter with you, Shirley?" asked the younger girl, with new curiosity. "I didn't know you *could* be angry. You're not in love with that old creature, are you?"

"Not in the slightest degree. Only I don't care for scandal about my friends, with no sort of foundation."

"There's foundation enough, if one chooses to dig it out. So far, I haven't bothered to look for it; but I've heard hints enough, goodness knows. Look here! If I can find out something definite against him, will you promise to chuck him?"

"Why are you so keen about it? I'm not going to inflict him on you; and surely, at my age, I can choose my own friends. If he turned out a bad character, I should naturally avoid him; but I can't see any reason for trying to manufacture a case against a man who goes everywhere and knows everybody and seems to be thought a lot of."

"Yes, but will you promise?"

"I won't promise anything," said Shirley, with a fling of impatience; and then laughing, with her

customary pleasantness: "Do let's talk of something else! I'm quite sick of the subject of Sir Edward."

"Right-oh!" Joyce agreed, in cynical indifference. "Let's go upstairs and play the gramophone. I've got some topping new records."

CHAPTER VI

WET fog had submerged the town until an hour or two after noon, when a biting little wind had stolen through the streets and open spaces, crumpling up the milky draperies and bearing them away to the south-west. In the parks, grass, paths and seats were clammily bedewed; and drops fell thickly from the shining, black boughs. With the dissipation of the protecting mists, the winter day had grown yet more bitterly cold. Foot-passengers hurried on their ways, their hands buried deeply in pockets or muffs; motor-carriages roared by with closed windows; the outside seats of omnibuses were thinly peopled, but the interiors were congested with standing passengers. Drivers of covered vans retired as far as possible into the depths of their caves, still singing with a dismal lustiness, as is their habit; those in charge of open carts bent their faces speechlessly before the wind, or draped their necks and shoulders with sacks, where these were available. Dogs were in a mood at once quarrelsome and romantic; there was a notable absence of playing children. The yellowish sky was hard and pitiless.

In Hyde Park, as evening approached, the seats near Stanhope Gate were naturally deserted; but in

a foot-path, some little way from the drive at this point, a solitary man sprawled on a bench, sharply contemplating the damp, leaf-strewn earth before him. It was Gathorne Burrell and he was exceedingly ill equipped for such rigorous weather; for he wore neither great-coat nor gloves, and his coloured shirt collar was low enough to expose most of his throat. The tears that dripped quietly from the branches above him had darkly spotted his soft hat of pale grey felt; and his brown shoes were soaked with moisture from the grass through which, it seemed, he had recently been walking. Nor did he wear the air of one of those fortunate, and somewhat irritating, beings who are insensible of temperature, his pale, expressionless face and thin hands being blue with the cold. Yet he had not collapsed on to the seat through illness or exhaustion, for now and then he shifted his attitude unconcernedly, or threw an upward glance at the intricate girder-work of the trees; and at such times his lips moved, now voicelessly, again in some disjointed words. One might have fancied that intense creative concentration of the mind made him unconscious of the material world, or it could have been not uncharitably supposed that he was only one of those many semi-sane persons with whom a big town abounds. He shewed no signs of intoxication.

Wayfarers were growing rarer and rarer along these by-roads; and Shirley Cresswell, cosily dressed

in furs, her high-heeled shoes tripping nimbly beneath her short skirt, noted the seated figure, as she approached it, with a wary eye. The dusk deepened; the demeanour and array of the man were discouragingly eccentric. She glanced at the drenched grass which shut her in on either side; halted for a moment, with a foot on the low iron railing that bordered the path; and then suddenly resumed her direct course, at increased speed, and putting as much distance as dry ground permitted between herself and the bench that she had to pass. At the light sound of her footsteps Burrell looked up, staring intently at the newcomer; but he clearly did not recognise her until she was exactly opposite him, when he sprang to his feet, plucking the hat from his head. The girl, however, nodding slightly without looking at him, flashed by and was twenty yards further on her way before he was able to overtake her.

"How do you do? You don't remember me," he said, offering his frozen hand, and smiling with a touch of derision into her widely startled eyes.

Shirley surveyed the extended fingers doubtfully, before allowing her own gloved ones to drop limply through them.

"Yes, I do. Isn't it cold? I must be getting on, though. I'm late for an appointment."

She nodded, with a blush, and renewed her flight; while Burrell, with some absence of tact, fell into step beside her, his violet hands dangling empty

(for he had jettisoned his gold-topped walking stick at his recent resting place) and his strained, blood-suffused eyes fixed on the rounded cheek which was all that was visible between her high fur collar and the brim of her hat.

"I'll walk with you as far as Marble Arch," he informed her.

"I ought to get out into Park Lane at once and take a cab," she explained, with a hurried coldness.

"Well, you can't now; you walked straight past Stanhope Gate. Anyhow, you're likelier to pick up a taxi in Oxford Street; and, besides, there's something I've got to say to you."

His intonation was so imperative that Shirley looked about her anxiously. In the wide drive, fifty yards or so to her right, there were still occasional pedestrians; and carriages passed with some frequency. At the first foot-path which led to this more populous quarter she turned aside, her escort still accompanying her.

"What is it?" she asked, after some moments of silence. "I haven't much time, you know."

"I've forgotten your name again, for the moment," he brusquely confessed, "but I know where we met; and I'm pretty sure that you're the girl that someone was talking about, the other day, as Edward Talbot's latest fancy. Am I right?"

The cheek which he was watching grew brighter in colour, but Shirley kept her face averted as she answered in rather a shaking voice.

"I'm afraid I don't understand, quite. . . . I must say good-bye here."

With the words she stopped suddenly and seemed to await his departure. A pair of lovers were sauntering by, rapt in an amorous speechlessness, their arms linked, their eyes contemplating the unseen wonder-land.

"Why?" asked Burrell, with an unwinking stare.

"I've got an engagement, I told you."

He looked up at the hard sky, and gave a quick, loud laugh.

"You're not expecting a fiery chariot, I suppose. Well then! There dosen't seem to be anybody here to keep an appointment with, beyond that housemaid and her boy. There isn't a cab in sight. You can listen to me until you find one."

"A bus would take me there," Shirley reflected uncomfortably, turning her eyes towards one that lumbered past at the moment.

"All right. I can talk just as well in a bus; if you don't think it's too public."

She seemed to collect her energies, and glanced at her persistent follower for an instant with obvious, if not very determined, annoyance.

"I'd rather be alone. Do you mind?"

"What have you been hearing about me?" he broke out fiercely. "Has Joyce Cassilis been talkin? Or Talbot? . . . Eh? Tell me!"

"Nothing . . . no," Shirley assured him, shrinking away from his angry gesture, and beginning once more to move forward. "Please go away. I wish you wouldn't bother me."

"You're telling lies," he declared, in a much lower voice, and walking close at her elbow, bending his head towards hers. "Someone's been talking; or why am I suddenly not fit to be treated with ordinary civility?"

"I hardly know you," the girl protested. "I want to be alone. I think you might go away, when you're asked."

"Was it Talbot?" he continued, still brushing against her and speaking almost at her ear. "By God, if it was!"

"It wasn't Sir Edward."

"What wasn't?" he enquired logically enough; and Shirley, taking refuge from her slip in complete silence, looked straight to her front, her lips a little parted, the colour receding from her face, and her feet stepping out faster than ever. It could be seen that she was frightened, but there were traces of anger in her expression that might supply the want of bravery.

"You're only a little fool," he said contemptously, his long stride keeping easy pace with her speed.

"I can see that; and it's what people are saying about you, too. I don't know why I bother. . . . Do you know the sort of fellow that's got hold of you? Eh? . . . You won't answer? All right! . . . Do you think he's a nice man? Do you thinks he's a man at all? Do you know the police are after him? Would you like me to tell you some of his adventures? . . . Look here! Listen! Don't be idiotic and obstinate! It's to your own interest to listen. I don't really care two straws what happens to you. But someone's got to stop him; someone's got to get it back on him. He's done enough. . . . He's—I don't know what he is, though I know what he says he is. But that's not possible. He's not sane; he's not human—by God, Miss Cresswell, he isn't! I'm sure of it. If I said three words to the police, I could get him stuck in prison to-morrow. Did you ever hear of the Tewkesbury Court business? No, of course, you haven't. . . . But would he stay there? Not he! One can never be free of him, so long as he's alive. But he can die, you know; he says so himself. He's frightened of that, at times, I'm pretty certain, though he pretends not to care."

All this was poured out in the same rapid, incoherent undertone, as they hastened over the gravel towards Marble Arch. Once a passing gentleman halted and looked after them curiously. The haste and averted eyes of the woman, the hushed gabble

and elbow-to-elbow propinquity of the man produced the effect of one seeking to escape from the threatening solicitation of a sturdy beggar. In all likelihood the passer-by had thoughts of a rescue, and then was convinced of having misinterpreted the situation, after another glance at the clothes and bearing of Burrell. At least, after a few seconds' scrutiny of the retreating figures he turned and went about his business.

"You've got to be told, if you walk me over half London," Burrell insisted. "I *will* tell you, whether you like it or not. I believe you're not a bad sort; and you're pretty, anyhow. . . . Keep away from that devil. Don't become the subject of one of his experiments. I tell you you're not the first, by hundreds. I've been just such another damned fool myself; and you shan't be able to say I didn't warn you. What does he do it *for?* Curiosity, sheer devilry—I don't know. God knows! Not for the motive of any ordinary man. . . . Or not often. Perhaps you may be one of the exceptional cases. Perhaps you're reserved for higher honours than most of them."

They had, by this time, reached the park gates, and Shirley, pausing on the sidewalk among the usual street crowds, lost the look of alarm which she had worn in the comparative desolation of the park. She confronted the persecutor boldly enough now.

"I don't want to hear anything more at all. I know all about you; and I shouldn't dream of believing anything you said against anybody."

"Great God, how stupid you are!" he cried impatiently. "What sort of amusement do you suppose I get out of chasing chance acquaintances round Hyde Park, and telling them a pack of lies? Or am I supposed to be a wandering lunatic?"

His disordered appearance and glaring eyes might have warranted the acceptance of such a supposition; but the girl did not take this line in her reply.

"I think you hate Sir Edward," she began.

"Ah!" he said, drawing in his breath quickly, and the admission of the fact flashing out of his instantaneously convulsed face.

"I knew, some time ago, that you'd quarrelled; and I know why. Because he won't have any more to do with you, you want to do him harm in any way you can think of—even with people that you scarcely know, like me. I've heard something of the kind before, from other friends of his. It's no good with me; I think Sir Edward is perfectly right. Please go away. I shan't say another word."

As she turned her back definitely upon him, he burst out in louder and wilder anger.

"So he's told you about Joyce, I see; and how shocked he was. He didn't refer to his part of the business, did he? He didn't tell you that I fell in love with her two years ago and more. He

didn't say that it was his doing that she never got to like me; or how he had the happy thought of finishing off the pair of us with one shot. Did he say that he had an old score against her that needed settling? I was to do that for him. That was what he had specially trained me for—that, and other work that he's still got for me, blast him! Yes, he means to get me back some day, sure enough. He hasn't done with me yet. Oh, he's quite confident. But there's one thing he hasn't allowed for. He's put me down, but I'm not out. He may get a surprise yet. . . ."

A taxi-cab passing at this moment, with its flag up, Shirley raised her hand, and it swerved in to the curb. Almost before it had stopped, she had the door open and climbed hastily in, with a knee-high backward view of trim black silk stocking; but before she could shut herself into solitude, Burrell had caught the handle, and had his foot on the step.

"I'm coming with you. I haven't finished yet," he cried, pulling against her, but apparently loath, at first, to put out his strength to gain his point. In face of her resistance, however, he lost his temper, and gave a violent jerk which made her fingers relax. The girl uttered a little shriek, half of fear and half of pain; and at this the driver of the cab, a stout, dark-faced man of middle age, stiffly

accoutred in an unyielding double-breasted ulster, rolled hurriedly out of his seat, and thrust his bulk between the disputants.

"Get off my cab. Leg go that door," he said, with loud huskiness, snatching it from Burrell's hand as he spoke, and shutting it with a decisive slam. Burrell, slipping off the step into the gutter, and barking his shins as he went, turned on Shirley's champion with uncontrolled fury.

"What the hell are you doing?" he shouted, with a face of white distraction. "What the hell do you mean by touching me, you dog?"

"Dog" was apparently a term which the driver considered inapplicable to himself. His brow fell, and his square under jaw shifted forward ominously.

"Touch yer?" he growled, planting himself squarely before his traducer. "I'll touch yer, to *rights*. I'll give yer a punch in the bleating ear-hole, if I've any of *your* chat, me lad."

To point the threat, he began to draw off his thick leather gloves, while a delighted crowd instinctively made a ring, proper for the proposed encounter. Burrell stared about him blindly, and turned aside.

"Ah, you're right!" sardonically commented the victor, pulling his glove on again. "Go on! Get out of it? Oxo, d'y'ear? Or I'll soon learn yer to come messing about with *my* fares."

The assistants made a smiling lane for the retreat of the discomforted Burrell; but he seemed unaware of any disgrace attaching to his neglect of a challenge. All his rage had slipped from him. He looked apathetically on the many faces, derisive, apprehensive or inquisitive, which surrounded him; and wandered off with a perilous vagueness into the traffic of Oxford Street. The cab-driver, grinning broadly, reopened the door and nodded reassuringly to the girl, who had been regarding the incidents of her rescue with alarmed eyes.

"Where to, Miss?"

She gave him an address; and "thank you so much" she added, with a relieved smile.

"Oh, that's *quite* all right," replied the man, gracefully putting aside this expression of her gratitude. "'E takes good care of 'is 'ealth, *'e* does. . . . Yerss! I wasn't in France and Salonniker for nothing," and, closing the door again, climbed back into his seat and wheeled off into the Bayswater Road.

Three days later Shirley received a couple of letters by post. The first, which she opened at breakfast in her flat, came from Sir Edward Talbot, and was laconically conceived.

New Place, Rye.
Monday.

My dear Shirley,

Our party is arranged for next Saturday. This is, I hope, giving you sufficient notice; but if you should have another engagement for that day, pray set it aside. The

car will call for you in Wigmore Street at five o'clock, so as to get you here in good time for dinner.

Yours affectionately,
Edward Talbot.

Bring plenty of warm wraps with you. We are in an exposed spot.

The second letter awaited her at her place of business. It was somewhat bulky, and addressed in a picturesquely straggling hand. When she found time to open the large, square envelope, she saw within several type-written sheets and a holograph letter of many pages. They seemed to have been stuffed into the cover in any sort of order, for the one that first came under her hand plunged, without explanation, into the midst of a subject that was totally strange to her. Beneath a line of small type came a heading in capital letters, suggesting an extract from a newspaper:

THE HOLBORN SENSATION

POLICE DESCRIPTION OF WANTED MEN

Shirley glanced upwards at the first line on the sheet, which stated in fact that what followed had been copied from *The Standard,* of a date in the late summer of the year eighteen hundred and eighty-nine.

"Scotland Yard," it ran, "has issued a description of two men who are 'wanted' in connexion with the mysterious affair in Tewkesbury Court, Holborn. Enquiries at the agents from whom the house was

leased disclose that the first of these two men, Archibald Gedge, was the person who conducted the negotiations and signed the agreement. The second is clearly he who opened the door to the neighbour, Mr. Carden, on Wednesday night last. We append the descriptions in question:

(1) Archibald Gedge. . . .

The copy broke off at this point in two lines of dots, and then resumed, this time in red letters, to stimulate the special attention of the reader, no doubt:

"(2) A well-dressed man, about forty years of age. Height: medium. Build: somewhat fleshy. Complexion: fresh. Hair: light brown, cut short and smoothly brushed. Eyes: blue or grey. Clean-shaven face. Talks in a quiet, educated voice, without gestures. Has a misshapen right ear, presenting the appearance of the upper portion having been cut away to the depth of half an inch. . . ."

The last two lines had been heavily underscored in the copy with black ink.

At this point Shirley put the sheet down on the mantel by which she was standing, with a tolerant smile; picked up the written letter, read the fantastic signature of Gathorne Burrell, and smiled again. The reason for her amusement was sufficiently obvious. Plainly Burrell's object in sending her these documents was to convince her that

the unknown malefactor was Sir Edward Talbot; and one needed no more than a moderate knowledge of arithmetic to perceive that this was grotesquely impossible. From the date of the extracts it was to be seen that the criminal, if still alive, must be somewhere in the neighbourhood of seventy years of age; and if Edward Talbot had reached his forty-fifth birthday, that must be the extreme limit of possibility. With his unwrinkled skin and alert bearing, it was improbable that he was actually more than forty—the age of the well-dressed man of Tewkesbury Court in the year eighteen hundred eighty-nine. The descriptive particulars of hair, eyes, stature and complexion were as commonplace and colourless as these things generally are. Nothing in the picture presented reminded one of Talbot more than of thousands of other men seen about the streets daily, except the peculiarity of the right ear; and on such a flimsy foundation as this only a very dull kind of malice or downright madness could be excused for establishing the identity of a popular middle-aged man of to-day with an obscure fugitive from justice of thirty years ago.

Four foolscap sheets of typewriting remained still unread, and the girl cast her eyes over them in careless curiosity. They purported to be taken from the same newspaper, and were dated two days previously to the other extract:

MYSTERIOUS OUTRAGE IN HOLBORN

"The attention of the police is engaged by a strange and shocking discovery, made in the early hours of yesterday morning in Tewkesbury Court, Holborn. Tewkesbury Court is a small paved square to the north of the main street, guarded from wheeled traffic at either end by rows of iron posts. It contains between thirty and forty narrow, four-storeyed buildings of considerable age; most of which are used during the hours of daylight as commercial and professional offices. Three or four are unoccupied; and one (number seven) is the dwelling house and office combined of Mr. George Carden, a member of the Institute of Civil Engineers. Mr. Carden is a bachelor, and his servants sleep out; so that, as he explained in conversation with our representative, he has always imagined himself to be, after ten o'clock at night, at the latest, the only occupant of the court, except, it may be, for an occasional caretaker. Wednesday night was, it will be remembered, exceedingly close; and Mr. Carden, being unable to sleep, dressed and went out into the square for a breath of fresh air at about half past eleven. The place was as quiet and deserted as it always is at such an hour; and he had paced up and down for ten minutes or so before his attention was called to a muffled sound of music, which apparently proceeded from one of the houses at the

end of the court furthest from Holborn. The unusualness of this so surprised him that he paused in his walk and made an effort to locate the sounds more exactly; finally deciding that they issued from number twenty-four, twenty-five or twenty-six. The nature of the music performed was, he says, impossible to appreciate accurately, on account of its faintness; but he is of opinion that it may have been produced by an harmonium or a powerful accordian. The affair struck him as strange, in view of the fact that no light was to be seen in any of the houses; and for some time after the music ceased he remained at that end of Tewkesbury Court, waiting for any further developments. Some little time later he was startled by a new sound, as of a human cry of distress, deadened by distance, or by a succession of intervening obstacles. It was repeated twice, and was followed by a silence; and Mr. Carden had now convinced himself that it came from number twenty-five. Although the cries had been insufficient to seriously alarm him, he ascended the steps of the house and listened at the front door; and within a few minutes he heard similar screams, but louder and shriller than before, and repeated a great number of times. His first idea, that they were uttered by a woman in travail, was negatived by two memories: firstly, that he was sure no family occupied the house in the day time, and secondly that he had so recently heard the

sound of music in the same quarter. Apprehensive, therefore, of something being wrong, he applied himself vigorously to the knocker and bell; and his summons was very shortly answered by a gentleman whom he is able to describe in some detail. This person was in ordinary evening dress of good cut, and was smoking a cigar; and Mr. Carden represents his manner as having been totally unmoved and ceremoniously polite. On hearing the cause of the visit, he laughed and expressed his regret that Mr. Carden had been disturbed. The house, he said, had been lately taken over as a club by a society of ladies and gentlemen interested in music and the stage. Many of the members were of the dramatic profession, so that their meetings were necessarily held at late hours; and the sounds which had perturbed his neighbour were caused by an instrumental concert, followed by the performance of scenes from a play. Mr. Carden, he said, was quite at liberty, if he felt any doubt as to the propriety of their occupations, to come up and join them. A considerable number of members was present, and they would be glad to receive him, he was sure. His manner entirely reassured Mr. Carden, particularly as the house, now that the door was open was perfectly quiet; and, apologising for his intrusion, he returned to his own home. During the brief conversation, the unknown man had stood sideways in the half-opened doorway, presenting only his profile to the enquirer;

but a gas light was burning in the hall, by which Mr. Carden could see him fairly clearly; and he is convinced that he would recognise him, were they to meet again. He particularly observed one distinctive peculiarity; a curious deformity of the right ear. The man gave a general impression of belonging to the rich and cultivated class. Mr. Carden returned to his rooms; but, for some reason which he cannot quite explain, he did not feel wholly comfortable about the affair, once removed from the presence of the specious stranger; and for some time he remained seated at the open window of his bedroom, overlooking the court, which was lighted by a single central lamp-post, and watching from the darkness of the apartment the door of number twenty-five. He had not been so engaged for long before he observed it to open for a few inches, slowly and cautiously, and then close again; and after a pause of some minutes it reopened, and a number of persons emerged, apparently of both sexes. Considering the warmth of the night, it struck him that they were all rather heavily muffled in cloaks and coats. Some carried bundles; and none spoke loudly enough for a sound to reach his ears, a singularly unnecessary precaution for innocent folk in this practically uninhabited square. What chiefly disturbed him, however, was that the whole party of perhaps two dozen persons, instead of taking their way homewards through the lighted thoroughfare

of Holborn, where hansoms were still to be hired, disappeared by twos and threes into the murky and intricate byways which lie between the north of Tewkesbury Court and Clerkenwell. The whole business struck him as so bizarre that his suspicions returned; and, having once more dressed, he went and related his experiences to the policeman at the corner of Gray's Inn Road. This officer was sufficiently impressed to enlist the aid of a fellow-constable; and the party of three proceeded to the suspected house. The front door had been pulled to, but not latched; and the investigators entered the hall, where the gas still flared. Here an immediately shocking discovery was made. A disordered heap of draperies, some of rich stuffs, had been thrown on a wooden bench; and, on lifting these, there was revealed, lying on its face, the unconscious form of a young woman. Mr. Carden states that she was entirely nude, with her long, dark hair loose, and seemed to have been outrageously mishandled. He speaks of livid marks about both wrists, a great number of red weals on the back, and scorched skin peeling from the soles of the feet, both of which had been terribly burnt. The police despatched him forthwith for an ambulance; and when he returned with it, the unfortunate woman was taken as speedily as possibly to Saint Bartholomew's hospital, where she now lies in a precarious condition. All three had believed that she was dead when they found her;

but we understand that there is some hope that she may recover from her injuries. Of the further discoveries in Tewkesbury Court Mr. Carden was not able to tell our representative anything; he was not permitted to see more, himself; and the police, we are informed, consider it essential to maintain the greatest reticence in the matter, in view of certain clues to the perpetrators of the outrage. The wildest rumours are afloat as to the nature of the nocturnal doings which Mr. Carden interrupted; and it is freely hinted, on what evidence we are unaware, that persons well-known in society were of the secret party of malefactors. Until further data are available, however, it is fruitless to speculate, and practically impossible to construct a theory that will satisfy all the circumstances."

Beneath this odd tale, a note was added in Burrell's handwriting:

"The girl died in hospital, without recovering consciousness; and the police have never yet made an arrest or issued any further statement."

Before she had finished reading the account of these sinister actions, the interest of Shirley was apparently engaged, for she turned back once or twice to re-read a phrase or line; and, when there was no more, she even picked up Burrell's letter in a hesitating manner, as if to seek in it some explanation of the puzzle. But after a brief consideration she tore the whole of the papers across, dropped them

into the fire by which she had been standing, and went about her duties as usual.

At this time of the year it was completely dark by the time the shop closed; and at about a quarter of an hour before the end of her working day Shirley was passing the high windows which looked out from the first floor on to South Molton Street, when she stopped abruptly and remained for some seconds gazing down at the opposite pavement. A street lamp confronted the windows of Delbruck's, and almost beneath it, and partly illuminated by its rays, a man in a bowler hat and a heavy frieze ulster was standing motionless, the pallor of his face, in which no features could be made out, raised towards the window at which the girl had paused. She passed back into the room; but came back again, and once again, at intervals to her post of observation; and on each occasion the watcher still stood immovably on the same spot. Finally Shirley called one of the apprentices to her.

"Miss Dallas," she said, "I wonder if you'd mind asking Sergeant Carey to get me a taxi? I've got to put my things on, and I'm rather in a hurry."

Five minutes later the uniformed commissionaire came upstairs to tell her that the cab was waiting; and it was under his escort that she emerged into the December darkness. Gathorne Burrell was standing only a few yards away, watching the doorway; and as she passed through it he stepped hur-

riedly forward, as if to intercept her; but the stalwart Carey, under previous instructions, bundled her hastily into safety, and passed an address to the driver in an undertone, remaining himself standing between Burrell and the cab until it drove away. The young man, pale and distraught of countenance, preserved for a few moments an irresolute posture, staring into the sergeant's eyes with a kind of vacant anger, while his lips moved noiselessly; but as the ex-soldier returned his gaze with a contemptuous fixity, he turned away, and with a dragging step retreated along the diminishing line of lamps, until he vanished round the corner of Brook Street. Carey, squaring his shoulders anew and giving a twist to his moustaches, returned to his post on the shop steps, where he remained passing a word or two to the girls who began to troop out singly or in pairs. All around, similar prisons were having a gaol delivery. The dim street was full of chatter and laughter and the tap of boot heels.

CHAPTER VII

SIR EDWARD'S car arrived before its time in Wigmore Street on the following Saturday; so that Shirley's luggage was strapped behind it, and a start made almost as five o'clock was striking. In accordance with the advice contained in the letter of invitation, the girl was muffled up into the semblance of a brown bear, and had swathed her head in a thick veil; precaution wisely taken, for the still air was fiercely cold, and the car an open four-seater of very high power. The ease with which this mighty engine, with its light body, devoured the hills, the stormy speed with which it flew, screaming like a shell from a gun, over open common-lands, silently down glimmering high roads, or barking through narrow village streets, kept an icy gale constantly whistling past the passenger's ears; so that, despite the warmth of her clothing, she snuggled down among the fur rugs with which the tonneau was filled. Passing through Tonbridge, the driver, slightly reducing speed, asked over his shoulder if she would like the hood raised; and Shirley, agreeing, completed her journey more or less blindly. In these black recesses, buried in the warmth of the soft skins, she fell into a drowse, from which she did not

fully wake until the car stopped, and the driver dismounted from his seat to open an almost invisible white gate. Thereafter the road ran steeply upwards, between dark bushes, which were set so closely together that the car, as it climbed, brushed against them on either side with a continuous rustle, like the sound of an incoming tide on a quiet beach. Presently they seemed to pass through a little wood; for the tyres crackled over twigs and needles, and there was a faint smell of pine. Emerging from this, they halted finally in front of a door, beside which, on a stone bracket, a large, roughly made lantern of brass sheltered a single candle. By this feeble illumination could be made out the interior of a flagged Greek portico of some height. Beyond this there was little to be seen, for the head-lamps of the car, obscured to a point which was positively a danger to those in the care of so furious a driver, cast but a pale and inconsiderable fan of gold across the terrace. The night was pitchy dark. Not a star was to be seen; nor did any sound reach the ear beyond the throb of the engine, which the chauffeur left running, while he busied himself with the luggage. The house itself was a mere blind-eyed, indeterminate mass of grey against the blackness. It was impossible to guess its size or form.

Before the bags had all been carried into the porch, the front-door was set open, and a man-servant, extricating Shirley from her burrow, shewed her into

the entrance hall, a wide and shallow room, stone-floored, chill, obscure, surrounded by several doors, and containing neither furniture nor decoration beyond a big round table of oak and a splendid fireplace of carved marble, on whose great iron dogs, however, no welcoming logs flamed. Plainly the place was used solely as a vestibule; and Shirley regarded it with dispirited eyes.

"Miss Crassle?" asked the servant perfunctorily.

"Yes."

"This way, please."

His pronunciation and the quality of his voice, in saying these few words, were both unmistakably exotic. The vowels were very open, the dental almost sibilant, the general intonation what is loosely described as nasal; and he seemed to speak with a curious relish, both idle and luxurious. Shirley shot a glance at him as he opened one of the numerous doors and stood aside to let her pass. He was a tall, finely built young man, dressed in a silver-buttoned, swallow-tailed suit, with a high waistcoat of black and white striped stuff, and a white tie. His complexion was of a rich cream colour, his nose rather flat, his lips broad and pale, his abundant hair jet black and crisply waving. There was no depth in the brown eyes, the whites of which were faintly tinged with violet; nor could any expression be read into their brightness, except, possibly, a hint of sen-

suality; but his smile was both candid and agreeable.

Having shut the door of the vestibule behind them, he took the lead, and conducted Shirley up a narrow, carpeted stair-case, along a short corridor, lighted by a hanging oil-lamp, into a large bedroom on the second floor of the house. After the chilly darkness of the journey, and the unfriendliness of the hall, this retreat offered, by contrast, a most inviting picture, with its snugly cloaked windows, its wide, low bed, draped in an embroidered coverlet, its white-panelled walls, Persian carpet and grey satinwood furniture. A fire sang gladly to itself, there were flowers on the mantel, and the big arm-chair and couch were dressed in enlivening chintz. Three mirrors, in different parts of the room, tossed its reflection backwards and forwards to each other, and multiplied the golden flames of a dozen or more candles, which burnt in ormolu sconces on the wooden walls. Any sombre impression that might have been created by the bleakness of the entrance must have been at once put to flight by the sight of a chamber so warm, lively and modern. After looking about her for a few moments with a clearing face, the visitor came over to the grateful fire, slipping her fur coat from her shoulders, and stood there in thought while the footman brought in her baggage.

"I think that's all, Miss," he said in the same

lazily voluptuous manner. "I'll send Mrs. Skinner to you now."

He had not been gone ten seconds before the person whom he had named presented herself; and Shirley, turning at the sound of her entry, gave a perfectly audible gasp of alarm, which greatly entertained the new-comer. Mrs. Skinner was as black and shiny as the unburnt coals on the fire; a small and very shapely negress, of about Shirley's age, perhaps, dressed in a plain dress and apron of black stuff, and pleasant to look upon, with the genial hideousness (according to European standards) of her race. After the first shock, Shirley greeted her with apologetic cordiality.

"Gustavus send me, Miss," the negress explained. "Your dinner's in half an hour. Shall I dress you now, Miss?"

She proved herself an accomplished tirewoman, and of a most enthusiastic disposition; laughing delightedly as she changed Shirley's travelling dress for an extremely scanty frock (one might almost have supposed it to be a chemise) of plain black satin; and lavishing the frankest and most extravagant compliments on the girl's arms and shoulders, on the fairness and satin smoothness of her skin, on her slim hands, her narrow, arched feet, her burnished hair, the length of her dark eyelashes, the brightness of her lips and eyes, the filmy delicacy of her under-

clothing, and the glossiness of her black silk stockings—all with a kind of barbaric adoration which seemed, after one or two laughing protests, to embarrass and finally even to annoy Shirley. Flattering as such obviously genuine admiration must always be, it was expressed with a fulsomeness, and at times with a naturalistic attention to detail, that may be supposed to be more characteristic of Africa than of Great Britain. The black girl seemed to gloat over the physical charms of the white almost as might a glutton over some unusually appetising dish; even essaying a form of hackneyed imagery to mirror her emotions.

"Snow at sun-up and snow at nooning and snow at sundown the Lord took to the making of you, Miss, honey," she gabbled in her labial twang. "Snow hill and snow valley, grass gone golden in Fall, and lil blue streams wandering in the sunshine; pink shells off of the sea-shore; apples and peaches, rip'ning peaches and lil apples; all so soft and warm and smooth as a cat's fur."

While she thus rhapsodised, she was kneeling on the carpet at Shirley's feet; and, her task completed, she pressed her thick lips humbly to the hand which hung nearest to her. Shirley, instinctively shrinking from the contact, spoke with hurried politeness.

"Thank you very much. I shan't want anything else."

"I'm to shew you the way downstairs, Miss. Will you call 'Kate' when you want me? I'll be right outside the door."

"I'll come now."

Along the quiet corridor they passed, and down a new flight of stairs, at the foot of which Mrs. Skinner, still smiling and fawning, delivered her charge into the care of a butler who was there awaiting them—Mr. Jerome, as the negress informed Shirley in a whisper. This man was of middle height and spare; his dark hair was becomingly frosted with silver, and his wide mouth had fallen a little inwards with the passage of the years. There was nothing remarkable in his aspect, beyond a rather lugubrious gravity; but his accent, when he spoke, was odd, bearing traces of a combined Latin and American origin.

"Sir Edward is not quite ready yet, Miss. He told me to make his excuses, and ask if you would kindly wait for him in the library."

So saying, he ushered Shirley into an empty room, lofty and spacious, which distilled that stimulatingly mouldering smell connected with old books, and wheeled a chair for her up to the hearth. Closely packed shelves covered the walls to the height of about eight feet, and above them a number of obscure pictures in tarnished gilt frames figured dimly against a background of claret-coloured paper. A brass candelabrum hung from the middle of the ceil-

ing, but the light which its candles gave scarcely reached the outlying parts of the room. The furniture was massive and sober; mahogany and brown leather met the eye in every direction; and, except for the pictures, there was nothing present of a purely decorative character beyond a squad of little statuettes and busts or heads, some of terra cotta, others of a greenish stone, set up on flat bases or tiny pedestals of verde-antique, which were ranged along the high marble mantel.

"I'll get some more wood for the fire, Miss," Jerome announced, after a glance at the incandescent mass; and noiselessly left Shirley to herself.

As the latch clicked behind him, she picked up an evening paper which he had laid on the arm of her chair, glanced at the head-lines, laid it down again, and looked quickly behind her, first over the right, and then the left, shoulder. Beyond the circle of amber candle-light, the place was packed with shadows, which furtively shifted and altered in form under a close scrutiny. There are people who find wavering shadows but indifferent company to their solitude; and the pictures, moreover, were the reverse of heartening. They were chiefly of the Spanish school; heads of pale, sensual men in black velvet tunics; monks or hermits assailed by demons; martyrs enduring their torments. None were of any great merit, and one or two were mere copies of well-

known works by Morales and Zurbaran. The pigments had cracked and the accumulations of varnish blackened with age, until it was hard, in some instances, to make out the subject at all. The best preserved, a full length figure hung over a writing table in a space between two bookshelves, represented a beggar, tattered and filthy, peeping out through a rent in a great black cloak with which he hid his face. But one eye was visible, the bright glance of which it was impossible to avoid or ignore. On the whole, the saloon, although a handsome and dignified place enough, was likely to strike a highly-strung and solitary person, accustomed to the stir and company of cities, as a little lowering to the spirits. Shirley found so much to look at behind her chair that the newspaper remained unread; while patent relief sprang to her face at the return of Jerome, bearing a basket of logs, which he proceeded, with a meticulous deliberation, to build into a pyre over the glowing coals. His movements, as he bent to his work, were so discreet that hardly a sound broke the breathless silence that filled the house; and Shirley, after contemplating his humped posture for some seconds with an irritable contraction of the eyebrows, broke into speech.

"I thought, from what Sir Edward said, that there was to be a house-party."

The butler courteously stayed his labours, and straightened his back before replying.

"That is so, Miss. Some of the guests will be down here very soon."

"Ladies? How many?"

"In the party, Miss? I'm not quite certain. A goodish number."

Silence ensuing, he returned to the disposal of the wood, while the girl, her forehead smooth again, made a fresh attack on the news; but it might have been supposed that the servant's tacit ministrations worried her, for in another minute she spoke once more.

"How quiet it is here! Of course, I'm accustomed to London."

"Yes, Miss," Jerome agreed, facing her at once, a log in one hand. "The house stands very solitary."

"Oh? There's no village, then?"

"No village, Miss; and no other big house in the immediate neighbourhood."

"Really? But Rye's not far off—where the station is?"

"Where the station is, Miss, yes. Four miles, or perhaps a little more."

He held her with his dismal eyes for a while, as if to make sure that no more questions were forthcoming. Then, having laid the last billet in place, he gently dusted his hands together, picked up his basket, and moved towards the door. Before he reached it, Shirley stopped him with an enquiry, put with shame-faced carelessness.

"There are farms and cottages about, naturally?"

"Yes, Miss."

"Close?" she added swiftly, as he turned away.

"I beg your pardon, Miss?"

"Have you any cottages close to the house?"

"The grounds are a fair size, Miss. There's a farm just beyond them, to the east—"

He broke off abruptly, and Shirley started in her chair. The door had opened and shut softly, and Sir Edward Talbot was half way across the room. Abreast of Jerome he paused for a moment, moving his eyes from the butler to the guest and back again; then, dismissing the servant with a nod, he came up to Shirley, holding out his hand with a smile of welcome.

"So here you really are! How nice of you to come! I always had a vague fear that you might break your promise at the last moment—you're such a volatile person—and we should all have been inconsolable."

He was in evening dress, with a dinner jacket and black tie; and his empty eyes seemed more brilliantly translucent than ever, as he cordially shook hands. The smile on his smooth face was, however, little more than formal.

"I'm sorry I wasn't able to welcome you in person on your arrival. But I hope you've been properly looked after."

"Oh yes."

"Oh yes?" he repeated, good-temperedly mimicking her unenthusiastic tone.

"Quite, thanks," she assured him; and then, laughing rather fretfully, gave an explanation. "I'm glad you've come, though, Sir Edward. I was beginning to feel a little—I don't know—sorry for myself."

"How's that?"

"Oh, nothing! It was silly of me. . . . Everything seems so awfully quiet here."

"Well, well! After Wigmore Street—"

"I know; but I don't only mean that. The house feels empty, somehow; there doesn't even seem to be a clock. You see, I expected to walk into the middle of a lot of people."

"They're mustering by degrees. Two of them will be with us almost at once—Madame Ladmirault and her daughter, Olga. You'll like them, I think. Madame, perhaps, is a little too girlish in dress; but it shews a fresh mind, after all, and she's a lively, clever woman. Olga is a recent recruit to our numbers. . . . You speak French, of course?"

"Oh no! Hardly at all."

"Really? Well, Madame Ladmirault talks English perfectly, but Olga, I'm afraid, knows only her own language. However, I doubt if she'd say a great deal, in any case—a dreamy, shy young person. One would hardly take her to be a grown-up. Probably we four shall be alone at dinner, but the others arrive soon after. . . . So you began to sus-

pect me of arranging a three days' *tête-à-tête* with you, under false pretences?"

"Of course not!" protested Shirley, the note of resentment still in her voice.

"Some one has to be the first to arrive; and, thanks to the fiery zeal of my chauffeur, it happened to be you. Sit down again, do!"

She obeyed, and he remained standing by the mantel, gazing down on her. So long as she studied the carpet in pouting silence, he watched her with immovable solemnity; but as she looked up at him, the gravity of his face softened into a restrained amusement.

"You have a dreadfully suspicious mind," he told her. "But a few minutes more will prove my *bona fides*. I'm assuming that the presence of two other ladies will reassure you. Or would you say that a larger number is necessary to keep up the proprieties?"

"Don't tease me!" she pleaded. "You found out, long ago, how I fuss myself over little things."

"Of course I won't tease you," he promised, taking one of the small stone figures from the chimney-piece, and examining it absent-mindedly. "I'm only too anxious that you should be thoroughly composed before your initiation. It's essential that you should approach that with an easily balanced mind."

"But it's not to-night?" she cried, in a sort of panic.

He raised his face, and looked on her dispassionately.

"Certainly it's to-night. I thought I'd made that perfectly clear to you. The less delay, the better. As I told you before, most of my friends are pardonably reticent about their beliefs and enthusiasms. I appreciate the delicacy of this feeling, if I do not myself share it; and I imagine, although they haven't said so, that it is the cause of their absence from my dinner-table. They have no ambition to provide fodder for the derision, or even the idle curiosity, of London, where many of them are pretty well known. As for Madame Ladmirault and her daughter, they, like myself, are indifferent to gossip; partly, no doubt, because they have no great circle of acquaintance in this country. But supposing, in one of the fits of perversity that come over you at times, you decided not to go on with the matter, after being introduced to the others. I refuse to believe the possibility of such a thing; but you know that you have always reserved the right to do so, and I have had to let my friends know of the stipulation. In that case you would be able to return to London with a list of all the persons who had taken part in the proceedings here—laden, in fact, with material for humourous small-talk at the tea table."

"But I'd never say a word. How can you think—?"

"I don't. But they, who do not know you, neces-

sarily don't feel the same confidence in your power of holding your tongue. For that reason, we may believe, they prefer to postpone their introduction to you until such time as you have given the requisite hostages, so to speak."

Still twirling the little image between his fingers, he spoke with a comfortable softness; and Shirley seemed to weigh his proposition.

"But," she argued presently, "you told me that, if I didn't like it, I could stop at any moment, even after it had begun."

"I see what you mean. Certainly we came to that arrangement, absurdly unnecessary as it was. But until the meeting is finished, you will not be aware of the personalities of those attending it. They will be veiled."

"Veiled?" repeated Shirley, with a catch of the breath.

"For heaven's sake, Shirley," he beseeched, with mock horror, "don't let such a harmless word as that start you off again. You know, as well as I do, that the veil is a common circumstance of many religious ceremonies. After the start you gave, I hardly dare add that I shall wear certain vestments. Doubtless you fancied that I should preside in tweed clothes and a bowler hat. You seem to lack a sense of the appropriate."

His raillery, perhaps a trifle less genial than before, had no visible effect on her preoccupation.

"And in case—and if—" she hesitated. "What should I do, if I found I didn't want to go on with it?"

"You will," he assured her.

"Yes . . . but if I didn't?"

Sir Edward shrugged his shoulders.

"Presumably, like a sulky child, you'd go to bed; and to-morrow, before you saw the people you'd disappointed, my car would take you back to your flat."

She studied his blank face with a sort of wistful appeal, but he made no further effort at encouragement or amplification of his remarks.

"I suppose," she said slowly, "it would be too late for me to go home to-night, if—"

"To-night?" he broke in impatiently. "Start for London, by road, at midnight, when there's a bed for you in the house? What are you thinking of? And what in the world's come over you, since you came into the country?"

"I don't know," she faltered, attempting a poor smile, which was belied by a tremble in her voice. "It's so creepy here."

The words came hurriedly, and with them an unmistakable look of fear peeped out; an expression which her companion greeted with a curious smile, which, almost for the first time in their acquaintance, began in the luminous eyes, and very slowly crept down his face until it reached the corners of his shaven lips. In motionless silence he watched her

anxious expression and the restless movements of her hands, like one charmed and amused by the wayward foolishness of a child, and loth to reduce it to a commonplace reasonableness either by comfort or rebuke.

"Mmmm?" he hummed at last, on a prolonged note of soft interrogation. "Creepy? What do you find creepy?"

"Nothing particular; but the place itself is so lonely; and there's never a sound; and I don't like these pictures. And then there was a black girl who gave me rather a fright."

"What! Poor Kate? She's a most faithful, lively creature."

"I dare say. But I wasn't expecting blacks. And I didn't much like the way she talked, either. . . . And the butler and the footman, too; they're queer, somehow. I can't quite explain why."

"My dear Shirley, you're rather insular. These people have been long in my service. I brought them to this country with me, and you could hardly expect them to be exactly modelled on the pattern of the ordinary English servant. Jerome is invaluable. He comes from Baton Rouge, and is of unmixed French descent. I don't know what I should do without Jerome. The knowledge that he is mortal chills me at times. Kate and Gustavus I picked up in Charleston, ten years ago. He's a quadron, I fancy; a very handy fellow; while Kate, as you saw, is pure negro. I wonder at a girl of your brains and

tolerance being disturbed at encountering a few harmless people, merely because they are not of your race."

"It's not only that," she maintained. "Everything strikes me somehow as ghostly; and that black girl petting me up as if I was going to. . . . I don't know. Jerome told me, too, that no one else lives near here."

"That's true. We're not within gunshot of the nearest cottage. But why do you want other houses? Aren't you satisfied with your entertainment in this one?"

His voice was again perfectly good-humoured and pleasant, and Shirley smiled constrainedly.

"You must think me rather an idiot," she apologised, "but strange places and people often make me uncomfortable. I suppose I'm tired, too." She paused, and then added appealingly: "And then the thought of this—my initiation. You won't—I know you can't—tell me much about it beforehand. Naturally I'm a little frightened."

"Frightened? But why? I decline to believe that a motor drive, or meeting a nigger, can shatter your nervous system; and when you were in London, the prospect of it didn't alarm you in the least."

"Yes, it did; it always did rather. You know I took a long time to make up my mind about it. Besides, it seemed so different there . . . just talking about it in my room, with the electric light on, and

things passing in the street outside. . . . And then perhaps Mr. Burrell gave me a shock."

"Eh?" he interrupted, his voice becoming keener, though his face remained unchanged. "How has he been giving you shocks? I didn't know you'd spoken to him since we were all at the Cassilis' together."

"It was only a few days ago. We met in the park; and he behaved in such an odd way, and looked so dreadfully ill and mad."

"But you knew of the existence of invalids and lunatics before that, I imagine. What has that to do with your present position?"

"Only that as he's one of you. . . ."

"He told you that?"

"I understood him to say so."

Sir Edward reflected.

"It is true. He has been admitted, but he never got far. As you saw, he's a very unbalanced fellow, and has given me some trouble. You were witness, a long time ago, of his ill-temper towards myself, you remember. Since then I've made several efforts at reconciliation. Indeed, he was invited here to-night; but, as he has ignored the invitation, it looks as if he had not yet recovered his senses. . . . So this malicious boy, whom you recognise as being only partly sane, has been poisoning your mind about me, has he?"

"I wouldn't let him; I wouldn't listen."

"Then what *did* he say?"

"Nothing that I remember; but he terrified me at the time; and for some reason I can't get him out of my head to-night."

"You seem to be one of those people who take actual pleasure in scaring themselves; and of course it's always possible to find material for terror, if one's determined to have it. A solitary place, unknown companions, an unexplained ceremony, against which sinister hints have doubtless been thrown out by a crazy fellow—oh yes! here we have bricks enough for building a haunted house, certainly. The whole point is this: you are here under my guarantee, because you trusted in me, as a friend. May I ask if you trust me still?"

"You know I do."

"I'm glad to hear it. It would be an exceedingly unpleasant position for you, if you did not."

As he uttered the last words with measured deliberation, he turned on her a long look, cold, glittering and utterly vacant; and the girl, in an instant, became as white as paper. Once or twice her lips moved, but no sound came from them; and meanwhile the vacuity of Sir Edward's expression was slowly transformed into the aspect, half amused, half breathlessly admiring, which he had once before presented during their talk. As soon as the amusement was clearly recognisable, Shirley found her voice, though it was a fluttered and gasping one.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean no more than I said; that it would be a very uncomfortable thing for a girl to have no confidence in the man in whose house she was staying, under no other protection. But you have that confidence; so there's no sense in letting your nerves get out of hand. We've been friends for a considerable time, so that you probably know all that there is to be known about me. Women so rapidly turn a man inside out, I've been told. . . . Among other things," he added, after staring into vacancy for a while, "you must have discovered that I am much interested in you. Yet I doubt if you realise *how* much. . . .I swear that there is no woman alive who means so much to me; and there has been only one in the past of equal importance."

The sudden intensity that he put into his voice as he spoke the last sentence made his companion start. It was not the tone of a man making a declaration of love to a woman; it was filled with a kind of mystic exultation, sombre yet eager. The next instant he had laid it aside, and was saying tranquilly:

"For that reason I have stepped out of my ordinary paths to take you in hand, to try and make the world rather more enlivening to you than you found it before we met. You tell me I have succeeded."

"Rather!" she hastened to reply, as if ashamed of an ingratitude. "I've been quite a different creature, since you began to teach me."

"Can you tell me why?"

"Why? Because—well, because you've shewn me a new way of looking at things."

"Shirley, countless men and women could have done as much, and left you no better than they found you. How many philosophers, do you think, have a panacea for human ills?"

"But yours is the right philosophy."

"I must agree with you, since I profess it. But theory has little influence on personal happiness. You have your wretched optimists, and your indecently hilarious pessimists. The wisdom that I hope to teach you rises high above dialectics. All I set out to do, to begin with, was to engage your interest sufficiently to make to-night, and what follows to-night, possible. But you held back; you kept putting off the day; and meanwhile your whole despairing point of view altered, as a result, so you supposed, of this merely elementary instruction. I tell you that, by itself, it would have consoled you about as much as a handbook on algebra."

"Then what was it?" asked Shirley, with wide eyes.

"It was what you rely on at this moment, what will take you through all the succeeding stages—your trust in me, as you describe it; that is to say, the submission of your intellect to mine—the force which you drew, unconsciously, out of my mere personality. . . . But we don't want to enmesh ourselves in such discussions at present. The day which I have

longed hoped for is not to be wasted in words. Now that the strangeness has passed, I hope my house will seem a friendlier place than it did at first. You criticised my pictures," he said, with a casual glance round the walls, "and I don't defend them as works of art, though that is a good portrait of Tristan's on your left. But they seemed to me to be in key with the room, darkly rich, archaic, a trifle pompous. So I let them stay. You see I bought the house as it stands; books, furniture, everything."

"So none of these things are yours—chosen by you, that is?"

"Not many. A few hundred books in my study, and such other belongings as I can carry about on my journeyings. I am an incorrigible wanderer. These," he added, indicating the row of little figures on the mantel, "I brought here with me, to be my household gods. Have you looked at them?"

"No. Where did you get them?"

"From various dealers, at one time and another; I have a fancy for such things."

"They're old aren't they?"

"Some of them are very old indeed; older than our friend Silvanus at Overbourne. They were found in all sorts of places—Greece, Rhodes, Smyrna, Egypt. This," he continued, stretching out towards her the one which he held, "I take to be the *doyen* of the assembly. He comes from Cyprus,

and was made the best part of three thousand years ago. But his cult goes back farther than that, Shirley; farther than we can think."

She had stooped her fair head to look at the figure, a roughly fashioned object of pale green stone, goat-headed and human-bodied, with disproportionately large horns curling backwards over its head and down its spine; but, as Sir Edward ceased to speak, she looked quickly up at him, with an expression that was half puzzled and half, one might have thought, annoyed. Apparently unconscious of this mute and protesting enquiry, he turned away, and replaced the statuette on its former position.

"Who is he? What's he called?" the girl asked perfunctorily, after an interval during which her faint look of disturbance passed away.

"I christened him Eligor, in the absence of any proof of his actual identity," Sir Edward answered. "Here's another," he went on, touching with his finger the effigy of a pot-bellied, bearded, crouching creature, much less battered and formless than the first. "His name is Sytry, though we may suspect that he started life as Silenus. He is seven or eight hundred years younger than the other, and was dug up in Barca, while I was in the country. Poor old Sytry! This fellow," he pointed to a larger head of terra cotta, still bearing the traces of colouring, and representing a man's face, fierce and progna-

thous, the brows adorned with short bull's horns, "is of a much earlier period, though not as old as Eligor. I call him Gomory."

Shirley still remaining silent, her host picked up a smaller head of terra cotta, and regarded it long. Sharply indicated by the candle-light against the background of white marble, there might have been traced a fanciful resemblance between the still, well-cut features of the former speculator and the profile of the tiny and masterly sculpture that he studied. The hair of the image was, however, rougher and more abundant; and in one particular there was a marked difference between the living man and his prototype. The ears of the image, rising into points that were scarcely human, called attention by their contrast to the oddly flattened ears of Sir Edward.

"My tutelary deity—for the moment—Serguthy; but I have paid homage to the others, and shall again. We are changeable creatures."

Putting his hands in his jacket pockets, he gazed at his guest so long and absent-mindedly that she began to shift uneasily in her chair.

"What funny names!" she exclaimed, with a plain attempt to break up his meditations. "I don't remember hearing them before."

"Very likely not. As I said, I gave them myself to these idols, having no positive means of knowing the actual intention of the artists."

"Did you make them up?"

"Oh no! They are queer old Gothic words that appeared to fit their owners. The rest have been similarly baptized. Here," he told her, lifting a seated figure that held in one hand a sceptre and in the other an implement that seemed meant to represent a small flail, "here is. . . . Here is Madame Ladmirault!"

"Madame Ladmirault!" repeated Shirley, in some surprise; but a second later the door opened, and the two other guests of whom Sir Edward had spoken entered the room.

CHAPTER VIII

MADAME LADMIRAULT greeted Sir Edward with a mixture of familiarity and respect that would have befitted a dog which realises that its caresses are no less likely to be rewarded with a kick than with a pat. There was always a quality in his courtesy that exercised a restraining influence over the effusive. She professed to be enchanted to see Shirley, of whose beauty she expressed her admiration at once in open speech.

"Elle est très belle," she declared, nodding to her host, with the phantom of a smile; and once more ran her critical eyes over the girl from her fair hair to the toes of her high-heeled slippers, and back again. "Elle est très belle," she repeated, with another nod, and a sudden, almost fierce gravity, as though angrily perceiving that it was vain to look for more adequate words of praise.

She appeared to be nearer fifty than forty years of age, a tall, broad, fat, muscular woman, who radiated an over-powering vitality. Her dress, of pale green and gold, was cut away to the waist at the back and to the midriff in front, leaving her torso and arms, as thick as a man's thigh, almost naked, save for their impasto of dead white cos-

metic. One could still see that she had been a handsome creature some years earlier, but her lips had flattened and widened with age, there were violet bags under her great, dark eyes, her chin had lost itself in rolls of flesh, and her chevelure of crimson waves was very unconvincing. If it was a fact, it was one of those abnormal facts which are considered inadmissible in a modern work of art. She wore a quantity of valuable jewellery, and distilled an obtrusive scent of carnations.

"Pity Miss Cresswell's modesty, Louise," Sir Edward amiably enjoined her, "and talk to her in English. She disclaims all knowledge of French; only, I am convinced, through shyness. But we must humour her."

"Oh, I am so sorry," cried Madame Ladmirault, in her harshly unctuous tones. "My daughter speaks only a few words of English, and I was hoping you would be friends. Olga," she said in French, "shake hands with Miss Cresswell."

The young girl, who had been standing, unnoticed and on one leg, in the background, did as she was bid, staring at Shirley with her black eyes. If her mother was fat, she was as noticeably thin, and had an ill-nourished and almost childish air, with her long throat, narrow shoulders and chlorotic skin. Yet she was pretty in a frail way, and her short mop of stiff black hair, and dress of filmy white gave her a picturesque appearance. When she had

obeyed Madame Ladmirault's orders, she drew off again a couple of paces, and continued to devour Shirley with a regard of tragic earnestness. A moment later, Jerome announced dinner, setting open a pair of folding doors at the end of the library which displayed a candle-lit and flower-decked table awaiting them.

The meal was sufficiently gay, for although Shirley was not able entirely to recapture her ordinary spirits, and Olga was almost dumb from the soup to the coffee, Madame Ladmirault was an agile conversationalist, while Sir Edward himself had never, during Shirley's friendship with him, shewn himself more companionable and amusing. With the intention, no doubt, of erasing the memory of any dispiriting first impressions of New Place which might linger in the mind of the novice, he entirely discarded the aloofness of manner to which, even in his best moods, he was prone, and took pains to win laughter and interest from his company. To Shirley he was flatteringly polite and provident, treating her in a marked way as the guest of the evening, breaking off in the middle of a remark to the older woman at the least sign of speech from the younger, and almost wholly ignoring the French girl. The mother accepted this as the freedom of an old friend, while Olga was plainly only too happy to be forgotten. She appeared exceedingly nervous, as if it were her first experience of a grown-up dinner party; com-

mitting various minor solecisms in table manners, and, in the intervals of hollow-eyed staring at the English girl who sat opposite to her, shooting anxious glances towards her stalwart mother. Her fleshless little hands, too, trembled most of the time, whether with embarrassment or some actual affection of the health it was difficult to guess. During the whole of the dinner she made no remark, except an occasional "oui, maman," "non, monsieur," when directly addressed. The few complimentary frivolities which Sir Edward tossed to her, she accepted without even the acknowledgment of a smile. There were times when the expression in her eyes, as Shirley accidentally met them, seemed to hold some message or enquiry; but apart from the fact that Shirley was ignorant of her language, the cheerfulness of her other companions, and the consolingly lively aspect of the round table, glittering with silver and crystal and gaudy with flowers, would have been likely to turn her thoughts into more entertaining channels than the unexpressed discomforts of a shy *débutante*.

Of the coming ceremony scarcely anything was said after the first few minutes, during which Sir Edward casually informed Madame Ladmirault, in English, that an introductory ritual, for initiates of the order only, would take place at ten o'clock, and that Shirley's presentation would follow it. The lady nodded, and expressed her approval of these arrangements, which she did not take the trouble to communicate

to Olga; and she added a few rallying words on the subject to Shirley.

"You are getting nervous, my dear, aren't you? I understand so well. You are young—twenty-five? Impossible!—and you are of the neurotic temperament—yes. So is my Olga; she was also a little stupid about it at first; she laughs now when she thinks of it. Ah, you may trust in Sir Edward; he is so fond of you—I don't wonder. He will look after you."

A shower of significant nods and a gurgle of provocative laughter accompanied her words, as she screwed up her puffy eyelids in a new look of admiration.

"Miss Cresswell has quite recovered her balance by now," Sir Edward proclaimed, in a tone of grave affection, "but we mustn't chaff her on the subject, or she may fly off at a new tangent. I've had great difficulty in bringing her to the scratch, Louise; it took time and trouble to win her confidence. She has but a poor opinion of the human race. You've no idea how *rusée* she is."

"I could not have guessed it," Madame Ladmirault confessed. "She looks so delightfully simple."

Sir Edward shook his head smilingly.

"Nobody could take her in," he said slowly in French. "I pity anyone who tries. They would be wasting their labour. You needn't tell her the

character I'm giving her; but she's a sly little thing."

Dinner had been late, and the party lingered over their coffee and cigarettes; but shortly before half past nine, the host rose in his place.

"Well," he said, "we ought to be preparing, I suppose. I take it for granted that more of our friends have arrived by this time; and those that haven't we must do without. Louise, will you and Olga get ready, and join us downstairs in half an hour or so?"

The big woman was also on her feet. The food and wine, which she had fully appreciated, had left some marks of their consumption in her laboured breathing and suffused eyes; but the whiteness of her complexion was unchangeable by internal means. She still held a cigarette between her twisted, scarlet lips, puffing at it with lightning rapidity, as she addressed her daughter in her native language.

"Come, darling; we are to go back to our rooms."

"Oui, maman," answered the girl obediently, oversetting her chair as she sprang up.

"As for you, Shirley," Sir Edward continued, "perhaps you'd like to have a look at our chapel, would you? After that, I shall be obliged to leave you to yourself for some time; partly because I shall be otherwise engaged, and partly because it's most desirable that you should have time to get your-

self in tune for the ceremony. You would find it difficult to walk, in a suitable state of mind, almost directly from a dinner table to a solemn rite. At a later stage you will learn to lay aside the pettiness of everyday life at a moment's notice; but you are only a beginner yet."

While he was speaking to her, with a return of his dignified tranquillity, Madame Ladmirault had reached the folding doors, and, at this moment, looked sharply over her shoulder.

"Olga!" she exclaimed, with an imperative glance; and Shirley, starting at the loudness of her voice, turned quickly in the direction to which the Frenchwoman's stare was aimed. Olga had sidled quietly round the table, and was now standing behind her, almost touching her elbow, her black eyes dilated, her colourless lips a little parted.

"Olga, viens!" cried her mother.

"Oui, madame," the girl hurriedly answered, but her swift submission appeared to infuriate Madame Ladmirault. An extraordinary violence convulsed her face, but before she could speak, Sir Edward had intervened with suave distinctiveness.

"Don't scold the child, Louise," he begged, patting Olga kindly on her narrow shoulder. "You'll unfit her for this evening. There! Take her away and console her."

All the anger had deserted the mother's face before he had spoken a dozen words; and, when he

ceased, she passed her arm lovingly round her daughter's waist and drew her out of the room, looking back to nod in the same intimate manner to Sir Edward before she disappeared. He gave no answering sign, but, having pulled a bell-rope, turned to Shirley.

"I've rung for Jerome to show you back to your room, because I want you to wrap yourself up well—I suggest a fur coat, if you brought one with you. The chapel is cold. I also have to make some change of dress; and I will fetch you in a few minutes. . . . I trust that you're feeling quite yourself again, by now?"

"Yes," she replied slowly. "Oh yes! I think I'm all right."

"Think as little as may be," he recommended, patting her shoulder as he had patted Olga's, a thing he had never done to her before, for he was noticeably chary of touching his friends. "Keep your mind quite at rest. Anticipate nothing. Conjure up no pictures. Remember, if you like, something of what I've taught you, if you don't find it disturbing. Float . . . let yourself go. What we call reality, you know, is no more than a transparent disguise, a rather ugly and obvious mask. You're on the brink of truer and bigger things. . . . Jerome, take Miss Cresswell back to her room."

The departure of the other guests, the cessation of the chatter of the table, and the return to less

normal subjects had their effect on Shirley. Her face once more grew anxious and she seemed on the point of making some appeal or addressing some enquiry to her friend, but he bowed her out with a formal finality, and she was obliged to follow the discreet figure of the butler into the upper regions of the still utterly noiseless house.

It was nearly a quarter of an hour later before there came a knock upon her bedroom door; and when, muffled in her long fur coat, she opened it, she fell back a little, despite the notice that her host had given of a change in his attire. The ex-speculator was dressed, in a manner startlingly unlike his usual careful conventionality, in a black cassock buttoned from throat to knee, and thence hanging in loose folds onto his feet, which were covered only with sandals. In this monastic array, he looked greatly taller and even more imposing than ever, and his manner had changed with his costume. His pale face was rigidly set, the heavy white lids drooped over his eyes, and he gave no smile, as might have been expected, at Shirley's innocently expressed astonishment, although he referred to it verbally.

"You're ready? Come along, then! I'm sorry I startled you, but I gave you warning, didn't I? The vestments that I wear at our assemblies could not possibly be put over modern dress. You yourself will be veiled; and, as it happens, the frock

you are wearing is entirely suitable. Otherwise I should have had to ask you to change it."

While he spoke he was conducting her in the direction of the library; but, before they reached it, he opened a door on his left hand and motioned to Shirley to pass through it before him. She found herself in what was probably the study to which he had previously made some reference; a grave, drowsy retreat, adorned with richly bound books in stands of carved ebony, warmed with the dying embers of a fire, and lighted, like Shirley's bedroom, with candles in branched sconces. In an alcove at the further end, partly veiled by a faded carpet hanging from a rod, a small organ had been built. The lids of the manuals were open, and a whirring, breathy noise within seemed to denote that the bellows were being blown by some mechanical device. Shirley looked enquiringly at her companion's set face. She seemed to want confidence to originate any conversation herself, but followed Sir Edward and briefly answered what was said to her, with the docility that a school-child might show towards its master.

"You didn't know I played? It is an essential part of our ritual. Nothing but music can induce certain transcendent moods—you must have realised that before now. I will go before you here; be careful how you follow."

He pushed back a curtain in one wall of the recess, and now began to descend a narrow flight of stone steps. There was no light on this steep stairway, but sufficient followed them from the study to make the passage easy. At the bottom was a short tunnel, the end of which was closed by a heavy drapery; and Sir Edward, holding this aside, allowed Shirley to precede him into the chapel of the secret order to which she was soon to be admitted.

For some seconds the eye, accustomed to the comparative brightness of the rooms above, was unable to make out the details of the place, the only plainly visible object being a lighted lamp of deep blue glass, which, hanging on thin chains from the roof, furnished the sole illumination. Little by little, however, things began to take shape. Shirley and her silent associate were standing on a platform or dais of stone, raised on three wide and shallow steps above the floor of a small vault, the groined ceiling of which was not more than a dozen feet above their heads. In the side walls five deep niches had been cut into the stone, three on the left hand and two on the right. They were of sufficient size to have held life-size statues, but contained nothing but certain small implements, lying on the flags; in one a stick, or wand, about five feet in length, in the second a shepherd's crook. The others held a sickle and two unsheathed and long-bladed knives, one with a dark, the other with a white hilt. Above these niches

hung banners of a dark blue, embroidered in various, presumably symbolic, devices; primitively simple representations of an heraldic rose, set against a gold cross, of a fleur-de-lis, of a snake curled about a stick, of a large capital T, and of the Greek letter Phi. On the right-hand wall, where the third niche should have been to balance the number of those opposite, a door of dark wood, silver hinged and handled, marked the position of an ambry. At Shirley's elbow, in the middle of the dais, a great canopied chair, or throne, stood with its back to the curtain that shielded the entrance; and these heavy draperies, as well as a similar one that hung at the further end of the vault, were of the same blue as the banners, and gorgeously stitched with silver thread. On the further side of the chair, a big, tongueless bell of bronze was supported in a rough wooden frame; and there seemed to be nothing else in the room, except three long benches, set back a few yards from the lowest step of the dais. But the most conspicuous quality of the cellar was the cruel, the glacial cold. It seemed as if the savagery of the December night must have been in some way artificially intensified; or as if the rigours of a hundred winters had been hoarded in this subterranean chamber. It was a cold that stung the skin, hurt the lungs to inhale, and laid a stifling hand on the heart. Shirley caught her breath, and shook from head to foot.

"Yes," agreed Sir Edward, looking at her quietly through the blue obscurity. "It is a condition that is desirable for our initiates in the earlier part of our rites. You will not find it like this, by the time you are called to take your share in them. We mustn't stay here now; time is getting on. Follow me!"

Without further remark from the man, or any question or comment from his disciple, they traversed the length of the dim room, and passed out behind the deep folds of the glimmering curtain. Here, in a little bracket on the wall, a hand-lamp was burning; and Sir Edward, taking it in his hand, led Shirley through an open doorway and up a second flight of stairs, which wound steeply into the upper storeys. These steps circled round a thick pillar, giving the impression of having been built in a tower contrived against the outer wall of the house; for there was no landing or break in them of any kind, although their number shewed that they must reach into the highest floor. The walls were damply crumbling, and glittered here and there with a crystalline efflorescence; nor was there any window or loophole to admit the light by day. The pallid flame of the hand-lamp, going on before, finally displayed a pointed archway, filled with a heavy oaken door, studded with flat nail-heads; and, when it had been pushed open, the pair emerged into a circular room, the warmth and clarity of which made a grate-

ful contrast to the icy gloom below. It was, however, very sparely furnished with a table, on which a few books lay, and two elbow-chairs; nor was there either blind or curtain to hide the tall sash-window. But the carpet on the floor, the fire on the hearth, and the silver lamp on the table, made amends for other deficiencies. To the right of the archway by which they had entered, a second door of the same pattern as the first led, it might be assumed, into the main building. Sir Edward, blowing out his hand-lamp and setting it on the chimney-piece, waved Shirley to a chair, and stood, erect and solemn in his flowing cassock, before her. The girl, slipping her fur coat from her shoulders, looked anxiously up into his face; but there was nothing to be read in its mask-like immobility.

"Here," he told her, "I'm obliged to leave you alone for a time. I'm afraid it can't be less than an hour, but I hope you won't find it too tedious. If you are bored, there is something for you to read; but, above all, you should do your best to empty your mind of the ordinary affairs and interests of life. I don't want to agitate you by overrating the importance of to-night's events; but they represent, as you know, a long step—a far longer one than you have yet taken. Shirley, I have every confidence in your powers of reception and resolution, and yet I own that I await the result with profound anxiety."

It was true. For all his determined impassivity

of aspect, his voice was not absolutely under control, and it was manifest that he was imposing great restraint on himself. Once or twice, as he was speaking, he raised his downcast eyes and permitted their illegible lambency to play over the slim, black figure before him, with a haste that was almost furtive. If looks did not belie him, he was, for the first time in the months of their friendship, nervous.

"One more thing," he continued, folding his hands in a priestly manner. "I particularly ask you not to leave this room until I come back. Your presence amongst us might be wanted at any moment, and it would be exceedingly troublesome to find you gone. This door," he added, opening it a few inches and shutting it again, "leads into the third-floor corridor; and, in case of need, a call would bring one of the servants, who will be within hearing. They sleep on this floor. . . . I suppose I need not warn you against coming down the chapel stairs until you are summoned. You will understand that any interruption of our service would be greatly resented."

He was silent for over a minute, staring at the carpet, and presently added:

"It would be unpardonable. You understand?"

With the last words, he raised his face and looked at her seriously.

"Yes," she answered in a nervous undertone.

He nodded and turned away towards the stone

stairs, darting a last doubtful look back at her as he disappeared into the gloom. Then the door shut behind him, and she was alone.

For some time she sat motionless, now with empty eyes, now gazing unthinkingly at the leaping fire, the pattern of the carpet, the books on the table. One of these she presently drew towards her, and, opening it at random, turned over a page or two. A small subsidence of the coals in the fireplace brought her mind from her reading with a start, and she turned her attention to the window. The glossy black oblong threw back her own seated image and that of the placid lamp, as if it were a mirror; but of outside objects nothing whatever was to be seen. After studying the reflected picture for a little, she rose from her chair, and, crossing the room, put her face close to the glass. From this position it was possible to make out, at the distance of a few inches only, the sturdy, naked branch of a tree; but, beyond this, the darkness was utterly empty, breathlessly still. There was not even that faint crackle of frost that may often be heard on a windless night in midwinter. Shirley peered long into the vacancy before returning to her place, pausing on her way before the second chair, upon the seat of which lay a folded bundle of deep blue stuff. Picking this up and shaking it out of its creases, she discovered it to consist of two long, filmy veils—the robes of her

novitiate, no doubt. She dropped them where she had found them, and applied herself again, with a small frown of determination, to her book.

At first she seemed to be successful in pinning her mind to this old and heavily bound quarto; but presently uneasiness made itself once more apparent. She closed the covers hastily, and sat drumming her fingers on the edge of the table, occasionally twisting her head rapidly to look over her shoulder. Twice she reopened the book, twice she shut it; and then, rising to her feet, took a few indecisive steps up and down the room, before coming to a standstill by the corridor door, her face turned sideways towards it, as if listening.

So she remained, holding her breath, for some time, before putting her fingers on the looped handle, and, with every precaution against noise, slowly turning it. For all her care, a faint click resulted, and she paused again, with raised eyebrows and an intent face, before drawing the door gently towards her, and putting her head round the edge of it. Before her lay a long, straight corridor, flanked on either side by doors, brightly lighted with oil lamps, the floor covered with coarse matting. All of these doors, except one, were shut; the one which had been left open shewing only the pitch darkness of a presumably empty room. Shirley took a step across the threshold, hesitated, and then walked gingerly a yard or two down the passage, turning anxious eyes on the

gloom of the open doorway as she passed it. From the hidden interior of one of the bedrooms beyond came a faint sound, the noise of slow and heavy breathing; and the girl halted once more, to incline her head towards the panels of the door.

"Yes, Miss?" said a voice enquiringly, at her elbow.

"Oh!" cried Shirley, jumping round with a little scream of fear. Mrs. Skinner, the negro maid, stood close beside her, her thick lips rolled back from her dazzling teeth in a subservient smile.

"Oh, how you startled me!" gasped Shirley angrily.

"I heard you, Miss, from my room. Can I do anything for you?"

"Yes," Shirley answered her hurriedly; and then broke off to contemplate the servant's sly, laughing face. "No," she corrected herself, growing a little paler. "No, it doesn't matter," and she turned back in the direction from which she had come.

"Nothing I can get for you, Miss?" the negress urged, following close beside her. "The master said—"

"Nothing, thank you. I was only just looking—"

Without finishing the sentence she was back in her lonely room, trembling and frowning, her palm pressed against the heavy door which separated her from the intrusive black woman. Once or twice she shewed signs of returning to the passage, but

she never got beyond the point of raising the latch; and finally, crossing the floor with a heavy sigh, she stared for long minutes gloomily out through the uncurtained window. When she turned away from it, it was with a certain air of resolution and haste; the manner of one who has taken a rash decision and is too well aware that the courage necessary for its fulfilment is likely to be short-lived. Quietly opening the door of the cellar-steps, she descended to the first turn of the stairway, and peeped down into the gloom beneath. No sound ascended from below, and, touching the wall with her fingers, as a guide to her feet, she crept a little further. Still the silence was profound; and, with a disappointed face, she came back into the light and warmth, and fell into a further meditation. But anxiety evidently won; for picking up her fur coat, she slipped her arms into the sleeves, and, still with the same affrighted speed, groped her way downwards towards the chapel, this time without stopping for an instant on the way. The first ten steps plunged her into utter blackness, but the construction of the staircase made it possible to accomplish the descent without any great danger of a slip. The heavy stillness of the air gave the impression of entering a catacomb; and even when her feet told her that she had reached level ground, there was not a whisper to betray the neighbourhood of the assembly which should, by now, be

in the midst of the mysterious rites which preceded her own initiation. Almost at once, her hand, stretched out before her, encountered an obstacle which might partly account for this voiceless desolation. The door of the low archway which divided the stairs from the chapel had been shut; and, passing her hand over that portion of the surface where the handle and keyhole should normally have been, she could discover neither. It would seem that the door fastened from inside only. She pressed her cheek against the woodwork, and waited, a shiver occasionally running down her from head to foot, although the air of the passage was by no means so cold as it had been when she last passed through it.

The interval that elapsed before her curiosity was rewarded might have been five or ten minutes, though to the listener it must have seemed like hours. From some incalculable distance came a sound; or, rather, one became conscious of a vibration which, it was felt, had been long present, but unrecognised; difficult, at first, to differentiate from the pulse of blood behind the ear-drums; a rhythmic shudder which, by slow degrees, took on a tonal quality. So it persisted for a while and then fell to a lower note. Behind this closed door and the thickness of the two great curtains, someone was holding the keys of the organ, producing a succession of single notes, long-drawn, muffled,

and apparently chosen quite arbitrarily. They stood in no relation to each other, and were possibly intended only to accustom the ear gradually to the disturbance of the silence; for presently the unseen player passed into combinations of notes that grew ever more complex and various. An uninstructed mind was incapable of forming them into a melody, or even a disconnected sequence of melodic phrases; yet it was abundantly clear that they were not the product of a wanton or ignorant wandering over the manuals and pedals. Behind them lay a definite intention, an individual and even imperious personality. Long as the time of waiting had seemed, this odd and disturbing performance appeared greatly longer. Although the air overflowed and trembled with sound, it never rose above a murmur, nor paused for an instant. There were times when it had suggestions of a primeval simplicity; others when it was distractingly involute, full of gross harmonies, and dissonances that were a pain. Progessions broke off, as the grateful ear began to recognise them, in unmodulated flights to remote keys; and no alteration in volume of tone ever marked these startling aberrations. Yet through it all ran an overwhelming affirmation that something was being expressed, some secret that struggled to make itself comprehensible; infinitely elusive; now manifestly and triumphantly cruel, now inexplicably unclean, again merely unintelligible. It was like listening

to some very old man, his faculties almost gone, maundering and licking his chops over the memories of a long and vile life; losing the thread of his tale, passing from it into a thousand extravagances, senilely oblivious of the plan with which he had set out; and yet surfeited with vanity and retrospective delight in his own achievement and contests and bestialities. Heard in this velvety blackness, it produced an invincible sense of loathing.

It ceased, on an unresolved discord, as inconsequently as it had begun; the stillness reformed itself, and endured until the recollection of what had broken it up became unreal and incredible. Once or twice Shirley beat a cautiously hasty retreat up the stairs, to a point where she was hidden by the central pillar, as if in fear that the ceremony was finished, and that the door might at any moment be opened upon her prying; but as she was drawn back from one of these panic flights to her former position, a new sound within the chapel held her motionless. A curious chanting was to be heard, which, while recalling the Catholic office, yet seemed to be delivered with vastly more passion and vehemence than a priest employs. The single bass voice which produced it must have been of extraordinary sonority, for though the intervening barriers necessarily diminished it greatly, it yet came quite loudly to the listener. No words, however, could be distinguished; nothing but a deep musical note, constantly

and slowly repeated; yet, for all its deliberation, charged with enthusiasm. Every few minutes it broke off for a longer or shorter period; and one could conceive the unseen officiant turning to a new prayer in his mystic breviary, or pausing to perform some ceremonial act or gesture. The number of these exhortations or invocations seemed endless; but Shirley shewed no further disposition to leave her post, though the ecclesiastical nature of the sounds might have been expected to reassure her as to the character of the service that was taking place. This measured intoning to a noiseless congregation was just such a solemn and decent ceremony as the novice should have foreseen from the hints thrown by Sir Edward in the past.

At length the chanting came to an end; and, after a brief silence, the girl drew her coat closely about her in readiness for flight. Evidently, however, something caught her attention as she was turning away, for she applied her ear yet more closely to the crack of the door, and seemed as though struck into stone. A new and peculiar noise was just preceptible; one that suggested the low and guarded murmur of a number of voices, a humming, almost inaudible, note, often reinforced by a sibilant hiss; and, in the midst of it, a perfectly unmistakable sound—the high quaver of a woman's laugh. It was gone as soon as it came, broken in the middle, as if hastily stifled; but its effect, in contrast with the

hushed vibration and the ceremonial intoning that had preceded it, was startling and ugly; and Shirley, rigidly crouching against the door-post gave a sobbing gasp in sympathy. At about this time the air of the passage began to be faintly charged with a scent, sharply different from its own odour of mouldering dampness; a perfume both sweet and sickly, the smell of lilies dying in a warm room. It grew ever stronger, until it was inexpressibly cloying, and even disgusting. Yet in some way it stirred the imagination, sending it journeying on strange byways. In the dark, Shirley's figure swayed slightly against the door-post.

Of a sudden, the great chanting voice was uplifted again, this time in but a few words, thrown out with a swifter and intenser exaltation; and, as they ceased, a curious crooning was distinctly audible above the murmuring undercurrent. Whether it was expressive of pleasure or sorrow it was hard to determine. It had a stifled effect, as though produced behind closed lips. So might some brave sufferer have sought to repress the moans of pain; yet again it might as well have resulted from an inarticulate joy, a savage satisfaction, like that of a cat purring over its still living prey. The very uncertainty of its nature gave it a disturbing weirdness. For some time it rose and fell persistently, and then died, and, with it, the hissing whisper that had accompanied it. While one could have counted twenty the

whole vault, like the bending figure of the eavesdropper, seemed to hold its breath; and then, without warning, the incense-laden blackness was torn by a scream so deafening and piercing that Shirley sprang erect with a loud answering cry of uncontrollable horror. At the same instant, from the hidden chapel burst out a sound of which none could mistake the meaning, though its cause was unseen and it had never been met before; one seldom heard publicly in the modern world; the hideous, guttural "Aaaah!" that sickens the foreign spectator at the side of the Spanish bull-ring; the gasp of many voices let loose by a common ghastly joy. And on the heels of this dreadful clamour, a perfect babel of Bedlamite uproar broke forth, hoarse cries, broken words, choking shrieks and shouts, and, high above all, the same shrill laugh that had been once before heard, renewed again and again in ever madder and fiercer frenzy, and pursuing Shirley as she fled in horror up the narrow stairway.

Breathless with its steepness and her frantic haste, she burst at last through the arched door at the top into the lamp-lit room, crossed it at a run, and laid hold of the handle of the corridor door. It turned in her hand, but the door itself remained immovable. Clearly, during her absence from the room, someone had locked or bolted it from without. She tore at it madly; she flung her weight against it; the solid wooden barrier did not even shake in its frame.

After some seconds of futile struggle, she fell back; and, with eyes distraught with fear, looked quickly about her. The gleaming mirror of the tall window held her gaze; and, swaying and shaking from head to foot, she ran over to it, and caught the frame in her hands. The lower sash was unlatched, but one of the cords was broken; and it took a considerable exercise of the girl's strength to push it upwards. After thrusting head and shoulders out into the night, she hurried back to the table and fetched the lamp. By the clear light of its amber flame, burning unwaveringly in the motionless air, a little more of the surroundings could be seen; the upper part of the neighbouring tree, and its bole, running downwards between spreading and leafless boughs, until it disappeared in the gloom. An active climber could easily have got astride one of the bigger limbs from the window-sill, and so probably, even in the blindness of midnight, reached earth safely. It looked a hopeless road for a London girl, hobbled with skirts, half crazed with fear, and of paltry physical strength; but Shirley seemed to consider its possibilities for some time, before shutting the window mechanically, and returning to shake the door again, and even call aloud for help, in her impotent anger.

It was long before, assured that all paths were closed to her except that which led back to the sinister rites of the cellar chapel, she fell weeping into one

of the chairs, dropping her face onto the fur-clad arms which she threw across the table. Whether silence had returned to the hidden assembly, or the twists of the staircase smothered the sound of their voices, certainly it was as still again in the room as it had been before Shirley set out on her voyage of discovery. Gradually the sound of her own sobbing breath calmed into apathy, and she lay there inert, as if lifeless or asleep. A faint sound from the stone stairway however was enough to bring her to an upright position in a flash, staring with a face of pale fascination on the archway. Someone was coming quickly and bare-footed up the steps. She leapt to her feet and across the room, with the evident intention of shutting the door between herself and the newcomer. But he reached it before she did; and she retreated dumbly, feeling behind her for the support of the table, as the figure of Sir-Edward, clad in his cassock and with his feet stripped of their sandals, filled the entrance.

CHAPTER IX

THE man was mad with excitement. Even his iron will was unable to conceal the fact. Although his teeth were tightly set, there was a perceptible tremor of the muscles of the face, a constant flutter of the eyelids. Pale as ever, his skin was shiny with half-dried sweat, and his eyes, illegible no longer, blazed with a horrible ecstasy. One hand gripped the other wrist, but the shaking of it was not to be so overcome. He confronted Shirley speechlessly for many seconds, before he found his voice.

"We're ready for you now," he said at last breathlessly, essaying an encouraging smile, but achieving no more than a mechanical rictus, fearfuly contradicted by his flaming stare.

Shirley made no answer. She had fallen back, with disordered hair and a desperate, tear-stained face, to the table, against which she leaned heavily, no less white and shaking than her companion.

"You've been crying," he murmured, with a sort of greedy delight. "Silly child! You've been frightening yourself. . . . Pull yourself together! Remember I expect you to do me credit at your initiation."

The word brought the girl back from her bemusement.

"I won't!" she said hurriedly, and almost inaudibly.

He made a quick step towards her, stopped, took a deep breath, and dropped his head, so that his eyes were hidden. The fingers of his right hand tightened visibly on his left wrist, and the struggle to repress the fury aroused by her words was abundantly plain. By the time he replied, however, he had succeeded in recapturing a little of the usual colourless courtesy of his everyday tones; but the surface of his face still worked and shivered like water about to boil, and he was careful to refrain from looking at her.

"I don't understand you. You won't *what?*"

She uttered no word, but her eyes were filled with a despairing defiance.

"You're overwrought," he said slowly. "Well, I'm not surprised, I foresaw it, to some extent. The whole affair is outside your ordinary experience. . . . But there's no great hurry, after all. Take your time."

"I won't!" she tremulously maintained. "I'm not going to do it. I won't come back to that cellar. Let me out! Sir Edward, let me out of this room!"

"Now, Shirley! Don't lose your head," he begged, without a movement. "Be quiet for a moment, and listen to me. Be quiet, I tell you! What's thrown

you into this silly state of fuss? . . . You haven't *been* out of this room?"

With the last words, which seemed to have occurred to him unexpectedly, he looked quickly up. The great translucent eyes still burnt and glared, but the frenzy that had lighted them was little by little giving way to a kind of distracted craftiness, and he kept them fixed on Shirley menacingly.

"No!" she assured him, with a terrified gasp.

"Then what in the world . . . ?" He broke off, and seemed to rearrange the form of his question. "I thought possibly you'd been scaring yourself by prowling about dark passages; perhaps meeting that nigger girl that you found alarming, for some absurd reason. But if you've been sitting quietly here by yourself, all the time—you swear you have?"

He shot the question at her suspiciously, and she gave a dumb nod, while the arm which supported her against the table bent as if she would have fallen.

"Then what's happened to change your state of mind? I left you here, not half an hour . . ."

Before he could say more, she burst into a torrent of half whispered words.

"Let me out! I won't go back. I'm terrified. Sir Edward, do let me out! You swore you would, if I asked you. You know you did. Oh, do let me go! I feel so ill. I can't stand any more. Oh, please let me out!"

"Be quiet, be quiet, be quiet, you stupid creature!"

he cried, smothering her prayers in a loud sternness. "Whether you go or stay, you certainly can't go in this baby state. Sit down and collect your senses. Then we'll talk it over rationally."

"I will get out—I *will!*" she sobbed, and was again at the door, shaking it with all her strength. He watched her coldly.

"It's locked," he told her presently. "You see that. What's the use of battering at a locked door? One would scarcely believe that you're a grown woman. Come here and sit down, as I told you."

She turned her back to the door, gazing on him vacantly, and slightly shook her head; but there was no courage in her face.

"Come here and sit down!" he roared suddenly, throwing up his chin, and permitting a look of malignant fury to peep for an instant out of its ambush.

Shirley took a step to one of the chairs, swayed sideways, and collapsed into it and against the table, with closed eyes. After contemplating her thoughtfully for a little while, Sir Edward picked up one of her wrists, held it for a second or so, and then carelessly dropped it. Still she did not stir; and taking a key from under his cassock, he went out through the door leading into the corridor, locking it again behind him. It was some minutes before he returned, his features now almost wholly composed to the semblance of grave concern, bearing a bedroom carafe and tumbler in his hands. Shirley's

eyes were open again, and her cheek rested on her hand, but she was as white as snow, and seemed hardly to understand her surroundings. He half filled the tumbler and, coming close beside her, put his left hand on her shoulder, and with the other held the glass to her lips.

"Drink some of this," he said encouragingly.

She sipped it slowly, without looking at him; and when she at last turned her head away from the glass, he put it aside with the bottle, and took the chair opposite to hers, resting his elbows on the table, and leaning across it towards her, until their faces were not more than three feet apart.

"Now you'll feel better," he assured her. "I had to be rather rough with you, for you were losing all self-control. Don't try to speak for a minute of two. I want you to understand the position. You are here with me; there is no one else within call, except those who take their orders from me; it entirely depends upon me whether you go or stay. There are things you must, in any case, be told; and I haven't time for argument or childish temper. When I have finished—I shan't take long—you can say anything you have to say. Till then," he rapped the table lightly with his knuckles, "you will kindly be quiet."

There were tears on the girl's frightened face, but she only looked back at him in a spell-bound apathy. Once or twice, during what followed, her lips moved dumbly; once she even stretched a hand half-heartedly

towards him, as if in petition; but she made no sound, nor altered her attitude of exhausted semi-consciousness, for some minutes.

"You have," he reminded her, "definitely refused, more than once, to come back to the chapel with me. That is to say, of course, that you refuse to come of your own free will. I needn't point out to you that it would be perfectly easy to compel your attendance. But that is not to be thought of; you must go through your initiation willingly, or of what value would it be, either to yourself or to us? I say you must, Shirley; you shall; yes, and you will when you know the reason why I take all this trouble about you. Perhaps I should have spoken before. It must have made things easier. But I did not realise that it was necessary. I thought that you were quite prepared to join us, and that the extraordinary distinction for which I had reserved you had better not be disclosed until you were more advanced. But, in the face of your present incomprehensible obstinacy, I have altered my view. I must tell you now, and it seems strange that words should be necessary. Haven't you guessed yet? Haven't you seen that I want you, that you are to be *my* woman, *my* equal in knowledge and power—mine for ever?"

He sat erect in his chair, his face afire, with an air of incredible and arrogant majesty. So might some great king look, some Roman emperor whose brain had sickened in the consideration of his ab-

solute power over millions; who had already declared his own apotheosis.

"You know who I am? You would say that you did. You would describe me as Sir Edward Talbot, a rich man; one who has made a fortune, probably in commerce, and bought himself a knighthood; a fairly well-known person in London society, and the owner of a country house; sufficiently popular, sufficiently amusing, with more ideas than are to be expected from a successful financier. Is that it?"

Leaning regally back in his chair, he laughed aloud.

"What right, you ask then, have I to suppose that the possession of a fortune and a few occult fads gives me any chance, in middle life and with no great claim to physical distinction, of attracting a young and beautiful woman, who is herself quite reasonably well off? Well, I'll tell you; and you shall see if my presumption is as intolerable as you imagine."

Breaking off, he seemed to look for a suitable opening to his explanation; the girl, meanwhile, offering him no help, but contemplating him with the same dazed air.

"At one of our early meetings, Shirley," he said at last, "possibly at the first, you asked me which had been my college at Oxford; and, when I hesitated in answering, you put me down in your mind as a vulgar liar. That was natural on your part, but a mistake. I had truly been to Worcester; but in my day

it was known as Gloucester Hall, and it has since been not only renamed but rebuilt, from which you will gather that I matriculated some time ago. You were right. It was, to be exact, in the year fifteen hundred and seventy one, and I was sixteen at the time. Fellows went up earlier then than now."

Once more he stopped speaking, and looked at Shirley with a smiling sternness. Momentarily she remained unmoved, as if the words had hardly reached her. Then, in an instant, her eyes grew great and dark, and she shrank away from the table, her hands gripping the edge of it, and her body pressed against the back of her chair.

"You see?" he said. "I'm not altogether so commonplace a creature as you supposed. Perhaps you may think me worthy of a little more respect than you have so far given me. My fame is not small; it may even have reached your ears—and yet I don't know; you seem, for a girl of intelligence, to be profoundly ignorant. . . . Well, I did not call myself Talbot at Oxford. That was my mother's maiden name which I have assumed from time to time for adequate reasons. But at the university, and in the history of human wisdom, I am known as Edward Kelley."

The name, flung out with indescribable pride, effected no change in the expression and attitude of his hearer. Terror was the only emotion to be traced

on her features, and the clenched hands on the table shook.

"Even at sixteen my feet were set on the right path. I saw—vaguely enough then, it is true—but I saw a glimmer of light; and the passion for full illumination tore me. In my boyhood I had been trained as an apothecary; and, paltry as my instruction had been, it had been sufficient to give me a taste for that chemical research which was the basis of all my subsequent discoveries. In such things I shewed an extraordinary precocity which might have been expected to gain me general admiration and respect; but the truly wise have the world against them. You will find that yourself, and you will laugh at it, as I did and do. The ignoramuses who were by way of being my teachers were sharp enough to detect the trend of my studies; and they made an excuse of certain boyish dissipations to get rid of one whom they feared as their master. I was sent away from a college that detested me to my home in the town of Worcester, where I was little better liked. My mother was dead; my brother and sister—a couple of fools—despised me, as they despised all students. My father's one idea had always been to make me self-supporting and see the last of me. Informed by my tutors that I was useless for the career for which he had designed me, he insisted on my taking up his own profession—that of the law—and

earning a shady living as a country attorney. I did not care. The pretence of this mean trade was a good enough cloak to hide my true and secret activities. But in my youth I was a poor hand at dissimulation. What had happened at Oxford, happened again, nine years later, at Lancaster, whither I had removed from Worcester with a newly married wife. The hatred of the stupid was inflamed; and, as they could bring no real charge against me, they were obliged to invent a ridiculous story of forgery. The dull and cruel justice, before whom they hauled me, was filled with the same instinctive, unreasoning loathing of a personality immeasurably superior to his own. I am sure he weighed in his mind the possibility of sending me to the gallows; but hardly daring to go so far, he wreaked as brutal a vengeance on me as he thought he safely might. My ears were cropped, and I was whipped out of the town, a beggar and a felon."

The hatred of the mob was evidently not even yet as ridiculous to Sir Edward as he had asserted; for at this point he rose and began to pace the room, his brow bent and his eyes glittering.

"The devils nearly succeeded in their object. It was touch and go whether I starved or not. I had no books, money or instruments; the mutilation which they'd inflicted on me (you can see the marks of it still) prevented me getting any but the meanest work. Despair had nearly conquered me; but I resolved to

risk one more throw against fate. London, or rather, Mortlake, was my goal—the home of the only man whom I knew to be likely to appreciate my genius—and I started off on foot. I had to steal, more than once, to keep life in me on the road—turnips and carrots and eggs, which I ate raw under the hedge-rows where I slept. My feet were in rags, my hair and beard long and matted, and my torn clothes encrusted with mud, but I reached the place at last, and walked straight into Dee's house. 'This is what I have learnt and discovered and guessed at. Such and such natural gifts I have,' I told him. 'Will you take me as an assistant?' Scarecrow as I was, he never hesitated; and for six years we were inseparable."

Sir Edward sank once more into his chair; and, tilting his head upwards against its high back, meditated. Shirley was watching him with undiminished fear, but with a livelier attention. Her face was less pale, her attitude more rigid.

"Dee was a man of immense learning, tireless industry but only moderate intuition; while in worldly affairs he was one of the stupidest of people—suspicious, futile, credulous and weakly ill-tempered. If you have never heard my name before, Shirley, I am sure that of Doctor Dee must be familiar to you. I understand that he appears in illustrated books for the young, which probably figure largely in your library. Some day I must amuse myself by seeing

what they have made of him. . . . He really seemed to be a treasury of all human knowledge, but he himself had added nothing of much importance to the store. That was his dream, the realisation of which he saw to be possible through my vastly greater powers. He was rich enough to indulge his fancies and, for a time, to keep me in a secondary position; moreover, I believe he had a personal liking for me, at first. Joan, my wife, was summoned from the cottage near the Coniston Old Man, where she had taken refuge, to set up house with myself, Dee and the girl whom he had lately married. I say nothing against Joan Kelley, who was a good and personable creature enough; but Jane Dee was the first, and almost the last, woman I ever met who seemed to me to be worthy of being the mate of a philosopher. What her origin was I don't know; she was not more than half his age, if as much; but she over-topped his dusty bookishness as loftily, almost, as I myself did. She had all the gifts, corporeal and incorporeal; if I had had time, I could have taught her everything; everything that I shall teach you, Shirley. We became lovers, of course. That was inevitable; for I was only twenty-seven then, and hardly less a poet than a scientist and mystic. Dee knew of it, and expressed no sort of protest, beyond, I fancy, making retaliatory advances to my wife, whether with success or otherwise I was not sufficiently interested to enquire. The fact is that we two men were far too

deeply occupied with our joint researches to quarrel about the ownership of a woman or so. I had become his skryer—or speculator, as he preferred to call it; that is to say that it was I who peered into the immaterial world, and brought my glimpses and experiences back to him, to be examined and classified in the light of his prodigious erudition. I know that, after we had quarrelled and parted, he accused me of robbing him of his wife's love by a pretended spirit revelation, seen in the crystal ball, that we were to hold our women in common—a perfectly false and ludicrous statement, invented in sheer senile jealousy and spite. As if the unseen forces of the universe would be likely to be brought into action over such trivialities! Nevertheless his assumed disapproval of my profligacies gave him a means of parting me from Jane. She who might have been by my side at this moment, as young and no less beautiful than yourself, has long ago rotted away in the grave. That shall not be your fate."

Momentarily the pride had gone out of his voice and posture; and, resting his cheek on his hand, he had fallen into a tone of quiet reminiscence; but when he once more took up his tale, the old vaingloriousness returned rapidly.

"Yet God knows he ought to have been forbearing with me! All his claims to immortality rest on my labours; indeed, the instructed, nowadays, have transferred the unmerited adulation of the old man to my-

self. It was I who suggested, urged, finally insisted upon that excursion into the West Country which had so marvellous an ending, It was my power of divination which took us, after protracted wanderings —during which, by the way, I became possessed of that term of Silvanus which you saw at Overbourne . . . it was by my advice that we came to Glastonbury. Had I done no more than take him there, he should have been eternally grateful; but that was not all. If I hadn't been with him, he would undoubtedly have gone away as empty-handed as he arrived. Not he, but I, found the rifled tomb in the abbey; *I* traced the thick-headed inn-keeper, who little guessed what he had pilfered, you may be sure; I grudgingly bargained over shillings with him, for the sale of the 'curiosities'; and it was I who broke in on Dee, late at night and crazed with joy, to share with him the lost secret of the philosophers. Why should I have so favoured him? It is true that he was more advanced in the practice of certain occult arts than I was. His wealth, for instance, was in a very small degree the result of his earnings by casting horoscopes and what not; it would, in his case, be literally accurate to say that he made nearly all his money himself. Alchemy had not been a special study of mine; but I could have learned—indeed I did afterwards learn. It was not, therefore, mere policy which led me to take Dee into my confidence. I cannot say that it was pure affection for himself, either;

I am not affectionate, nor was he one to inspire very warm feelings. But I loved his wife; and she, with a woman's inconsistency, was a good deal concerned about the welfare of the husband whom she had, as the phrase goes, betrayed. For my own part, too, I saw that it was inadvisable to break up, at that time, an association which was convenient to me. Until I acquired the power of using my new wisdom fully, I should be but badly off; and Jane, in following my separate fortunes, would have to endure a sordid beginning to our dual life. This I could not contemplate; she was made for luxury, physical idleness, dreams and beauty. Dee's long experimental training was useful to me, besides. And how we laboured, Shirley! What pangs of bitterness and fury, what deliria of triumph our midnight lamp has illuminated! What wasted cheeks and pale eyes have greeted the daylight! Before the rupture came I had picked the old man's brains pretty clean, without giving up too much of myself in return. Conceive that he could allow so contemptible a passion as jealousy to divide us in our amazing adventure! Yet he did so; and when I parted from him, in fifteen hundred and eighty-eight, I was not even permitted to say a word of farewell to the girl who had so often lain in my arms. Some pretence of a forgiving generosity he hypocritically maintained, even then; his written discharge was in my hand, and a speculator's mirror, a book and some other trifles

which he had given me were in my scrip. But *It* was hidden in my clothing, and I had put seven hundred miles, or so, of land and sea between us, before he discovered his loss. It was mine—I had found it; I had paid a guinea for it, no less! But I was aware that he regarded it as his, in return for his interested hospitality, and a few gifts of money which had cost him nothing. He would never have parted from it without a struggle to the death; and he knew enough about my past persecution, and had himself sufficient influence with the great, to have me thrown into prison. It seemed to me advisable, therefore, to recover my property by stealth, leaving Dee my wife in consolatory exchange. Will you believe that he afterwards put it about the town that he had made me a present of it? By this account, he had condemned himself to the common lot of mortals, and parted with incalculable powers, by giving up the key of all knowledge, before he had learnt to employ it, as a parting present to an unfaithful apprentice who had seduced his wife. It shews the unfathomable idiocy of mankind that this feeble lie was actually accepted as a fact. . . . You're listening?"

The sudden, fierce suspicion with which he shot the question at Shirley made her start and gasp; but she nodded submissively. The tensity of her attitude suggested that she was ready to spring up at any moment and fly from some instant peril. Sir Ed-

ward seemed to remark this, and smiled with an imperial indulgence.

"Probably you are a little alarmed—and certainly you must be greatly surprised—at being thus chosen from among all the women of the world and of the last three centuries; at triumphing over all the beauties and geniuses and great ladies with whom you rightly believe that I have been brought in contact. You, with your diffident ignorance, and your little dressmaking talent, and your gentle English prettiness! I cannot explain it now; it would take more time than I—and more perception than you, in your present stage of development—have got. But I *know* you are what I have been seeking; just as I knew Jane Dee to be, so many years ago. If you recoil, naturally enough, from the first glimpse of this tremendous future, you will soon grow accustomed to the idea. You pray, or have prayed, in your tasteless Protestant churches, for immortality, you know; and a very insipid form of it, at that. To be deathless and immune from the scourgings of humanity, in a world of which you must already have guessed the unending possibilities, is surely a more inviting prospect than the eternal kow-towing and strumming on harps which is all your spiritual teachers had to offer you. That victory over death I give you; at least," he hesitated slightly, "over what they call natural death; and what percentage of the population of civilised countries comes to a violent

end? A negligibly small one, made up almost wholly of those who are driven by folly or poverty into dangerous trades. Disease and old age account for nearly all of us; two enemies whom you and I shall never meet. We are our own law, our own moral code. Want cannot touch us; whatever money can give us is ours. . . . In this last respect Dee was my equal; but the final, the grand secret he never knew. It was not until I had been parted from him for over three years that my labours were rewarded with complete success. Look at me, Shirley! I was thirty-six years old then. Three hundred and thirty-eight years—is it?—have passed, races, countries and dynasties have vanished, the very face of the heavens has changed, and you may say that I am thirty-six still. I look more, I know. We matured sooner, in those days; and think, too, of my exertions and privations! But I swear to you that I have not lost a hair, or added a wrinkle, since that night when, in my great dusky room in Prague, I put the cup to my lips."

A strange glaze had been creeping over the girl's eyes during the latter part of his speech. Now and again she put back her shoulders resolutely, raised a hand to her forehead, or drew a long breath, as people will when faintness comes over them in some public place. In spite of the growing chill of the room as the fire died, her cheeks were brightly flushed; and this, combined with her clouded and

confused gaze, gave her something of the air of one in an early stage of drunkenness. Her hands had grown restless, but her lips were still silent.

"As I had flown from my tormentors in Lancaster to Dee," Sir Edward went on, "so I fled from the intolerable pettiness of Dee to the Emperor. Ample means, undisturbed privacy, the use of great libraries and laboratories, and complete freedom from care and responsibility were essential, if my work was to succeed. As a philosopher, I naturally knew Rudolf by reputation. With all his faults, he was one of the few great monarchs of history. He had an insatiable lust for knowledge; and he received me with the welcome that befitted me. Little as his despicable court sycophants relished the favour that he bestowed on me, they were compelled to conceal their jealousy and to provide me with the surroundings that I asked—such gifts as none but a very great noble or king could have bestowed. In the history of wisdom, Rudolf deserves a high place for this alone. But he was a difficult creature; violent in temper (a fault of which he never tired of accusing me) overbearing, easily swayed at the same time, and furiously impatient. Because I was a great philosopher, the greatest then or since, therefore I must be able to explain every secret of nature to him. A contemporary of mine (of whom I know you have heard) a little, ribald actor who was oddly enough a matchless poet and had met and, in his purely in-

stinctive way, sounded the depths of most of the great thinkers of that incomparably wise age, had said, truly and tritely enough, in one of his plays that there were more things in earth and heaven than were dreamt of in Philosophy. The sneer at philosophy is negligible. It is so; it must always be so; and Rudolf resented this. Moreover, the astounding, unrivalled powers which I had acquired were little interesting to him unless employed for his glory and satisfaction. He guessed, accurately, that I was keeping much from him; he condescended to the slander of the back-stairs; and I, whom he had not only enriched but ennobled, was thrown, without explanation, into jail. You may believe that I did not endure this humiliation for long. One morning the doors were found open, the warder dead; and I presented myself unexpectedly before the throne. Rudolf saw that he had misjudged my courage no less than my power; and for a while I was higher in favour than ever. Then his madness returned. Flattery had made him rank himself among the gods; past doubt, his mind was actually unhinged. In an unguarded moment I reminded him of my superiority to a royal amateur; and in a fury of outraged pride he loaded me again with chains. This time I felt that I had indulged the megalomaniac too long. He had served my purpose well; I needed him no more. Towards the end of fifteen ninety-five, after a short pretence of accepting my fate, I broke prison again, and left

Bohemia. Judge of his anger when he heard of his defeat and his irremediable loss! He sedulously spread the report that I had broken my neck in an attempt to let myself down from the walls of my dungeon—his vanity was as small-minded as that. The lie has passed into history, and little does it affect my happiness. Sir Edward Kelley can afford to smile today over the mortified conceit of a forgotten ruler, who took his vaunted divinity to the tomb centuries ago. Who knows or cares anything about the Empereor Rudolf the Second nowadays?"

As he asked the question, his glance once more sought the blindly unresponsive face of Shirley; and suddenly catching her hands in his he shook them in a sort of angry disappointment.

"Don't you appreciate it yet?" he cried. "Don't you see the wonder of your position—that an honour has been paid you such as no woman has ever before received in the history of the race? Answer! You and I are alone—the unique man, the unique woman—set high above the heads of all the living and the dead. Not even my followers, who are waiting below for your return, have an inkling of your destiny. They suppose you to be an ordinary novice, as each of them has been in the past; greatly privileged indeed by my choice, for most of them had to beg for admission. But that I should lift you up in one moment from the dead level of mankind to my own altitude . . . such an idea would be almost inconceiv-

able to them. Shirley, in half an hour, or less, your initiatory rites will be over. . . ."

"What was that you gave me to drink?" said the girl unexpectedly, in a loud, unsteady voice. Her face was scarlet, and her eyelids constantly closed and reopened heavily. "I thought it was water . . . What was it? I feel so ill."

"That will soon pass off," he said calmly, smiling on her with open significance. "You may endure it gladly. It is the last illness or discomfort that you will ever have to suffer."

Before he had said the words, she had sprung to her feet, swayed for a moment, with closed eyes, and then, pulling herself together, reached the window and thrown up the bottom sash.

"I'm going to faint," she said feebly. "Then there was something . . . ? I'm going to faint."

Leaning both hands on the ledge, she drew deep breaths of the icy air, looking, in fact, as if she might at any instant fall to the ground. Sir Edward pushed up one of the chairs from the table to her side, and she sank into it, with her forehead in her two hands.

"I think not," he quietly assured her, as he stood over her, regarding her with the same expression of triumphant expectancy. "There! Rest here a little, and think over what I've said. The cold doesn't matter. Nothing can hurt you now. In five min-

utes I will come back for you. Everything must be ready by this time."

"I won't come with you; I'd rather die," murmured Shirley with a hopeless obstinacy, her face still concealed in her hands.

"You will do what you're told," Sir Edward coldly insisted. "How can you imagine that, after letting you into the secrets of my life, I should allow you to throw us all over, and take a cowardly refuge with your scandalising middle-class friends? You have gone too far to retreat. Make up your mind to that."

"Oh, I take my oath I won't say a word," she sobbed incoherently. "Sir Edward, you used to be so nice . . . don't be so horribly cruel. . . ."

"Are you mad?" he asked angrily. "What's the matter? What are you crying about? What do you imagine is going to be done to you?"

"I don't know," she whispered, raising her vague, suffused eyes to his implacable face. "Something dreadful. . . . Mr. Burrell told me of ghastly things that happened in London . . . somewhere near Holborn. He said you did them. I didn't believe him, of course . . . it was years and years ago. But it was the same sort. . . ."

"Oh?" Sir Edward interrupted her with an interrogative inflexion; and seemed to ruminate. "So Gathorne goes as far as that, does he? H'm! He must be pacified. . . . Well, he spoke the truth, to

this extent only; I was concerned in the affair. After what you've heard from me, you'll understand that thirty years or so makes no more physical difference to me than thirty minutes. So that's what's been frightening you, you silly girl, is it? Surely you can't believe that you would be compelled to go through any such tests as Clara—the young woman of whom you heard—underwent, entirely, I may tell you, of her own choice. You will find, as you learn more, that initiates, while in the lower grades, sometimes desire to subject themselves to certain mortifications, which react beneficially on the—spirit, shall we say?—and enable them to reach a higher position more readily than they otherwise might. You must have heard of similar practices in the Christian church. Clara attempted too much for her strength—her heart, I gather, was weak. Some busybody interrupted us before we could recover her; and she paid the penalty which many pay in the search for knowledge. But can you suppose that I should wish, or even permit your body—your little white body—to be broken by such rigorous discipline? Why should it be useful, even if I gave my consent to it? The road is to be no painful one to you. You only, since time began, will gain the rewards without undergoing the toil and pain. Through me, you are spared all that. The initiation is a mere form, but an essential form. . . . Come, I mustn't waste

any more time. When I have seen that everything is in order, I will fetch you."

He turned towards the archway, paused, and added over his shoulder, in a passionless tone of warning:

"For your own sake, Shirley, I strongly advise you to be obedient and reasonable."

She had dropped her head against the window frame, her eyes half shut, her breath coming and going with difficulty; and she appeared, although still conscious, incapable of further struggle or protest. As he turned his parting glance on the helpless form, Sir Edward drew himself up, and, as once or twice before during the story, seemed actually to swell in stature in a gloomy transfiguration of mastery. Then silently he passed through the low arch and was gone.

It was some minutes before Shirley, wearily rolling her head sideways against the window frame, turned a heavy gaze on the spot where she had last seen him stand. Terror sprang into her dull eyes momentarily, as she found herself alone; and clutching and pawing at the walls, she contrived to regain her feet and get as far as the corridor door, which for the last time she shook feebly. In the same mechanical way she staggered to the table, and contemplated it blankly for some seconds. The glass from which she had drunk still contained a little liquid, and with a sudden movement she put it to

her lips and drained it. She had hardly done so before a returning intelligence began to awake in her face. Gradually the lividness of her pallor became less intense. Her eyes opened widely, and filled with an unnatural glitter. Biting her lip, she stared shiveringly on the head of the chapel stairs, before, with a rapid, crouching run, reaching it and bending her ear towards the darkness. Far below, the faint sound of bare feet on stone flags could be distinguished in the silence. Shirley, catching her fur cloak tightly about her, gazed around in desperation. The long blue veils still lay in the chair upon which Sir Edward had been sitting; and, picking them up, she knotted them together with frantic haste and fled to the open window. Then, as if she could find no way of employing them, she threw them from her, and listened again. The shuffling noise of the quiet feet approached nearer and nearer. A moment more she hesitated, searching the outer darkness with distracted eyes; and then with an unnatural activity she had scrambled onto the window-sill and, without a pause, thrown herself among the bare branches of the tree that grew close beside the house. Her body missed the great bough and fell among the tangle of twigs and lesser limbs which broke beneath her weight. A scream of terror rang out of the blackness of the night, as Sir Edward Talbot appeared once more in the doorway and shot a lightning glance about the empty room.

CHAPTER X

TELEPHONICALLY summoned with a mysterious instancy, Joyce Cassilis rang at the door of the Wigmore Street flat at half-past five o'clock on the Sunday afternoon, and was at once admitted into the glowing little drawing-room, where its owner awaited her.

Shirley, although dressed in a most covetable garment of the palest pink satin, trimmed with dull gold lace, her bare arms veiled with a cloud of rosy net, was yet a lamentable spectacle. She could scarcely limp across the room to greet her visitor; there was a dark bruise on her temple, a long angry scratch from eye to chin on one side of her face, her under lip was cut, and her left hand was covered with bandages. In her pretty tea-gown, with her cunningly dressed hair, she presented something of the appearance of one of those seasoned wax figures which may be seen in the windows of the lesser dressmakers, displaying the latest "Paris models" and languidly admiring the maimed hands which they stretched out before them in unintelligible gestures.

"Good Lord!" cried Joyce, visibly recoiling from this war-stained apparition. "What have you been up to?"

Shirley smiled feebly, shook her head, sank on the divan, cried a little, dried her eyes with three square inches of gaudy cobweb, and smiled again.

"I'm all right," she said.

"Well, so long as you're satisfied," answered Joyce, in a resigned ellipsis, as she turned away, blushing, to lay aside her long coat of grey squirrel's fur. As she openly confessed, she despised tears, and people in trouble only embarrassed her.

"I'm sorry I look such a sight," the culprit apologized. "Have you had tea?"

"Two, thanks; but one of your heavy, opium-tainted cigarettes might steady my nerves. What are these? The old 'Three Castles'? Oh, 'Harlequins!' I love them; they've got such a topping scent, haven't they? And the picture on the box is nice, too. . . . Tell me about the dog-fight—or were you chucked out of a taxi?"

Her friend hesitated, and delicately sniffed; but it proved a false alarm, for no tears followed. Presently she spoke rather shamefacedly.

"It's such an extraordinary story. I don't suppose you'll believe a word of it; and yet you *did* warn me against that man, several times, didn't you?"

"What? Who?" cried Joyce loudly, her blue eyes leaping into indignant flame. "Do you mean Edward Talbot? Shirley! He hasn't dared to knock you about like . . ."

"No, oh no!" the other hurriedly interrupted, to

arrest her friend's gathering fury. "I've been down at his place—where you went, you know. I don't know how I ever got back alive. But he didn't give me these bruises. I got those . . . well, I'll tell you."

And amid the pestilential effluvium that arose from Joyce's cigarette she began, falteringly and with many corrections and redundancies, to tell her tale. Before long, however, she warmed to her work, and words flowed more easily; while Joyce, for once hushed into mute amazement, sat staring on her from the other end of the divan.

"I didn't realise for some time after I'd drunk the water that he'd put anything in it. It left rather a funny taste in my mouth, but I thought that was only fancy. And then I began to have the most peculiar feeling. I don't know how to describe it. I wasn't exactly sleepy or stupid; because I heard every word he said, and understood him perfectly. But all my strength seemed to be going—my will, I mean. I knew I mustn't give way to it, and I did try and pull myself together. But I found myself wondering, every few minutes, whether it was worth making a fuss; whether it wouldn't save trouble to do what I was told."

"Shirley!"

"I know. . . . And, of course, the next second I was horrified at having even thought of such a thing, and more determined than ever to kill myself rather

than give in. But I had a ghastly certainty that I couldn't hold on much longer, and that this stuff, whatever it was, would get the better of me at last; and that he knew it, and that was why he'd given it to me. Did I tell you that I taxed him with putting something in the water, and he didn't deny it? What could it have been?"

"Some sort of dope," Joyce guessed, trying to inhale her smoke, and becoming momentarily black in the face. "I was pretty sure he doped. All that lot do, and they look pink and soft and sleepy and generally filthy. Haven't you noticed Magdalen sometimes, and that revolting Gathorne? Only he goes flabby white, like a sweetbread, instead of pink. Ugh! . . . Shirley, you might have fainted, and then what would have happened! Go on, do! How did you get away?"

"Do you know what *I* think it was? Or at any rate what he *thought* it was? That stuff that he'd taken himself, to make himself live for ever," Shirley murmured, with wide eyes of mystery. "Because he said such a funny thing about it, when I told him it had made me feel ill. He said: 'You'll soon feel all right again; and then you'll never be ill any more, as long as you live.' And afterwards he said: 'It doesn't matter having the window open; you can't catch any more cold now.' Don't you think that was it? You see he practically told me he was going to

give it me sometime—after I'd been initiated, I imagined."

"It doesn't matter much what he thought it was; though I'm quite sure he never thought anything of the kind," argued the younger girl. "Get on! I want to hear how you escaped from the loathsome old devil."

"Well, I knew I shouldn't have any chance in a struggle with him; and besides he had such a lot of people waiting to help—that dreadful black, and the footman, and probably those friends of his downstairs —these horrible creatures whose voices I heard. So I said I felt faint, and went and sat by the open window; and I thought: 'If he lays a hand on me, or the time comes when I can't bear it any more, I'll throw myself out, and then I shall either be killed, or get away.' "

"You might only have broken your legs, or something."

"I thought of that; but then they couldn't have gone on with the initiation, or whatever it was, if I had broken legs, could they?"

"Goodness knows! 'Initiation' may be only a way of saying that they meant to make you into a pie. Never mind that, though; get on!"

"I wonder he didn't guess; but I did my best not to seem too frightened, so he probably didn't dream how absolutely desperate I was, or he wouldn't have

left me alone for an instant. Anyhow, he went away to the chapel, saying he was coming back for me in a minute or two. I was determined he shouldn't find me there when he did; but by this time I was feeling so horribly ill that I doubted if I'd be strong enough even to climb out of the window. Then I remembered the stuff he'd given me to drink. It had bucked me up most tremendously just for a minute or two after I'd taken it, and perhaps it might have the same effect again, for long enough to let me get clear of the house. There was nothing left in the bottle; evidently he'd only mixed the amount he wanted, and put it into a bedroom bottle so that I should think he'd brought in the first water he could find. But there was still a little drop at the bottom of the glass; and, sure enough, as soon as I'd swallowed it, I felt all my beastly qualms pass off, and I wasn't dizzy or drowsy or cold or feeble; only terrified to death and furiously angry. . . . And then, Joyce, I heard him coming back."

She paused, partly for dramatic effect, perhaps, but largely to give an obviously genuine shudder. Joyce's eyes were intent.

"Bare feet slapping ever so gently on the stone steps. . . . Then I went quite mad. I can't think how I ever dared to do it, but I got on the window-sill, and jumped at a big branch that was near me. Oh, Joyce! When I knew I'd missed it! I didn't utter a sound; I just fell and fell and fell—miles, it

seemed, bouncing off things, and breaking through great tangles of stuff, till I came up against a bough that was thick enough to stop me for a second. It bruised me like anything, but I didn't feel it till to-day; and then it broke too, and I fell into a lot of leaves and mould at the foot of the tree. If it hadn't luckily been soft, or if I'd had a clear drop, instead of cannoning off branches all the way down, I should have been killed, or crippled at least. Even as it was, I believe my coat saved me from being badly hurt. It's very thick—double lined—and long, and I'd wrapped it round me tightly before I jumped. And it was simply in rags. However I wasn't very much the worse, although the breath was all knocked out of me, naturally; and there I lay for a bit, staring up through the boughs at the sky, or where the sky ought to have been—I could only see a foot or two above my face. Very likely I should have stayed there in a stupid sort of dream, and been caught and taken back, if he hadn't looked out of the window, to see if he could spot me, I suppose. He was holding that little lamp high above his head, and I could just make out his face, and one look at that was quite enough. I scrambled onto my hands and knees, as soon as he pulled in his head, and crawled off through the bushes, as quickly and quietly as I could. You see, he must have known I'd gone out of the window; there wasn't any other way; and he'd be perfectly certain to have the place searched, if only to find out

whether I was dead or alive; so all I could hope to do was to get onto the road, where I might meet somebody—even a tramp would have been lovely to see then, though I hate them as a rule, don't you? Or, if I didn't find anyone, I'd walk till I couldn't go any further, and then sleep in a barn, or under a hedge, or somewhere. But I never made any real plan; just to get away from that man was all I cared about, particularly as I knew the effect of the stuff I'd drunk was wearing off again already, and leaving me sicker and drowsier than ever. I began to be afraid that I should only be able to move at all for a few more minutes; so I must make the most of them, and get as far as possible from this awful house in the time. So after crawling about twenty yards, I got up and ran. The first thing I did was to plunge bang into a hollybush—at least, it *felt* like holly, but you couldn't see an inch among all those shrubs and things—and it knocked me down, and tore my face and hands. I felt just as I used to feel when I was small and fell down on the gravel in our garden at home. I cried when I'd picked myself up, I couldn't help it; but I managed to skirt round the bush, and found myself on a widish path, which looked just a little paler than the blackness everywhere else. It seemed to run down hill, and I hoped it would lead to the lodge-gate and the high-road. I felt such an idiot, tearing along in stocking-feet—

both my shoes had gone as I fell down the tree—and crying as I went."

Her eyes were overflowing again with the remembrance of her Odyssey; but Joyce kept her gaze fixed on the glowing end of her mephitic cigarette, apparently unconscious of her friend's weakness.

"Once or twice," Shirley continued, "I pulled up and listened, while I got my breath. There wasn't a sound. The night was as still as still. That, and the sickening sleepy dizziness that was coming over me worse and worse every moment made me slacken up a little. I was sure I'd got far enough away by this time to have given him quite a large part of the grounds to hunt for me in; and in the pitch darkness it wouldn't be an easy job. If I didn't rest before long, I felt I should fall down and die. I wanted so badly to sleep, Joyce. Wasn't it funny? I began to long for sleep even more than to be safe; and I kept saying aloud to myself as I walked on: 'Just thirty yards more,' and so on. "Just to the bottom of the hill. It must be close, now.' And then I stumbled and fell on my knees, and could hardly get up again. I was quite done; I should have to stay where I was, and trust to luck. There was a big clump of bushes touching my elbow, and I pushed my way through them into a little clearing, and there was Mr. Burrell sitting on the ground and staring up at me."

The seemingly unconscious artfulness of this narrative surprise brought Joyce bolt upright in her chair, with a face of amazement.

"Oh, Shirley! You must have been lightheaded."

"No, no. It was Mr. Burrell all right."

"But . . . but. . . ." Joyce's tone of protest was almost indignant. "Sitting in the middle of a bush in the middle of the night in the middle of the winter! What do you make out he was after?"

"I can't imagine. But there he was. I was wide awake still, and quite sensible. Really, Joyce, I'm not mad; it was him."

"How did you know it was? Just now you told me that it was pitch dark."

"He had an electric lamp; one of those little polished boxes, with a round glass in front, you know. I fancy he switched it on as I came through the bush, to see who I was, of course; and I could see his face for the moment as plainly as I see yours now."

Joyce resigned herself to the fabulous with an unconvinced grunt.

"Did he seem surprised to see you?"

"I'm not sure. No, I think not; his face looked quite colourless and blank in the light. No, as far as I remember he had rather the expression you might have if someone came into your bedroom unexpectedly, and turned out to be your maid. 'Oh, it's only you.' . . . But I hadn't time to notice very

much, because he turned off the light again at once."

"Without saying anything?"

"Not a word. Then I heard him getting up, and I turned round and ran for my life."

"Did he come after you?"

"No. That rather looked as if he was as anxious to avoid me as I him, don't you think? Every moment I expected to feel him catch hold of me. If he had, I should just have died on the spot. But I got onto the path again and some way down it without anything happening, and then I listened again, and the night was as quiet as ever."

"I'm quite sure you imagined all that part."

"Truly I didn't. If you knew what a shock it gave me, you couldn't suggest that it was my fancy. . . . So, when I was sure he wasn't following me, I ran on a little further, and then the path turned to the left, and there was the drive and the lodge-gate, sure enough. Next minute, I scrambled over the gate—somebody had locked it—and was on the high-road. You can't imagine how safe and homely and comfy it looked; though I was miles from anywhere, I knew, and probably the ditches were full of burglars and people. But I never thought of them; and it didn't even occur to me that *he* would follow me there, and take me back, although I can't now see why he shouldn't have. Oh, and I was so tired and sore and lame and sleepy and sick and out of breath, and my heart

thumped so abominably. I only managed to struggle on a few yards, and then I thought I'd sit down under the hedge and rest a little. You see, I'd forgotten there'd be a ditch, and I fell plump into it; but luckily it was a dry one, and I struggled up against the bank, and wrapped my cloak round me as well as I could, although I was quite hot then. But I knew I should be freezing again in a minute or two. . . . And then I don't remember any more. Either I fainted, or I dropped straight off to sleep. I think it must have been sleep."

"I never heard anything like it," Joyce was moved to admit. "I wonder you didn't die; and yet you seem to be pretty well now, barring bruises."

"I am; that's the extraordinary part of it. Of course, I feel stiff all over, and my head and hands hurt a good deal, and one of my legs is black and blue from the knee to the waist at the back. But I'm perfectly *well,* as far as that goes. And there's another thing; I always imagined I was a hopeless coward; but I got through all this, and didn't faint at the wrong time, or go mad, or anything; and somehow it's rather exciting to look back on."

There was a note of justifiable pride in her voice as she referred to her own exploits thus, and her companion gave her a word of temperate admiration.

"Yes, you were rather wonderful, when it came to the worst. But how on earth did you get back

here and into that dress, with your hair done and your nose powdered, by tea-time?"

"That was great luck. When I woke up, I suppose it must have been somewhere about nine or ten o'clock. The sun was shining (you had a fog here this morning, didn't you?) but it was freezing hard. For a little bit, I simply couldn't move a finger. It was like being paralysed; or in a night-mare, you know, when you see a mad bull coming your way. Then I managed to sit up and rub my hands together, like two sticks; I couldn't bend them or feel them at all, and they made a noise like dead leaves. But by and by I could use them a tiny bit, and I hauled myself out of the ditch and stamped my feet on the road until they came alive again, hurting horribly. I was shivering all over, and so hungry that I thought of eating twigs off the hedge. But that was the worst of it; I wasn't feeble, or ill, or helpless. Joyce, can you understand it? . . . There didn't seem to be a soul about, and of course I hadn't an idea which way to walk to get to Rye, or anywhere else. One thing I couldn't do, however, and that was to pass the lodge-gate. I couldn't even bear to look at it, and see how near it I'd gone to sleep. So that settled my direction, and I hobbled off as fast as I could, trying to get a little warmer; but it wasn't very fast; and in about ten minutes I saw a cottage, the other side of a meadow on my right, not far off. As I stopped to look at it, a

woman came out of the door to throw some water out—it steamed like anything in the sunshine. That was the only sign of human beings in sight, except just a glimpse, now and then, of *his* house, very white and glittery on the hillside on my left. Everywhere else, when I looked through gaps in the hedges, I saw only empty fields. Well, I was just going to climb over the ditch and make for this cottage, when I heard a car coming on the road, a pretty long way off, and I thought I'd wait for that. It could hardly be one of *his,* because it was coming fast from the direction in which I was walking. Of course, he *might* have been out in it to look for me; but it struck me that, if he was on a search, he'd hardly be scorching along at that rate. Anyhow, if I kept close to a gap in the hedge, and it did turn out to be him, I should have time to get half way across the meadow before he was out of his car. He'd hardly follow me, because the woman of the cottage kept coming to the door, and calling out to someone in the yard, whom I couldn't see; and I should scream at the top of my lungs as I ran. So as soon as the car came in sight, I got into the middle of the road, and waved my scarf, and it slowed down. Then I got back to the gap, and waited for it to come up; and it wasn't one of his, but a great big limousine, painted dark blue, with a man in it, all cosily wrapped up."

"Now I understand," Joyce commented.

"You wouldn't say that if you'd seen his face, staring at me through the glass; and the chauffeur looked almost more alarmed. They nearly made me laugh, although I was very cold and hungry and unhappy; but I could guess what I looked like—or partly; I didn't realise the full horror of my appearance until I got back here. I think Mr. Hibberd was a darling to have anything to do with me; I wouldn't have let such a disgusting object into *my* beautiful new car. When I saw myself in the glass, two or three hours later, I blushed all over to think of myself sitting beside him and talking, as if I was a decent human being. My hair was half down, and full of twigs and mould and dead leaves; my fur coat was in tatters, and so were my stockings, and lots of my toes were sticking through them. Fortunately I could hide my feet under the rugs, or I should think the poor man would have been sick. And my face was absolutely filthy, and covered with scratches, and bruised, as you see; and my cut lip had bled all over my chin. You'd have said I'd been drunk and fighting in the gutter, all night; but Mr. Hibberd was just as polite and friendly and talkative as if he'd been driving a smart woman down to Ranelagh."

"He'd fallen in love with you . . . beauty in distress, and all that sort of thing," pronounced Joyce.

"Joyce, *dear!* . . . I don't think I could ever

speak to him again, if I thought he had such a disgusting taste. Besides, he's over sixty, and fat and bald; and has a son who was a brigadier, and several other children. Such a kind old thing! He has something to do with ships, he told me; and he dashes up and down, every day or two, between London and Winchelsea, where he lives."

"How did you explain the state you were in? Did you tell him about Talbot?"

"I didn't dare. He'd have taken me for an escaped lunatic, like the woman in Wilkie Collins, you know. In fact, I was afraid he'd do that anyhow, until it occurred to me that people in asylums don't dress for dinner—at least, they *don't,* do they?"

"We didn't at the last one I was in," Joyce told her.

"Anyhow, Mr. Hibberd appeared to believe anything I chose to say, and was full of sympathy. As soon as he saw me, he got out of the car, and came up and asked me what was the matter. I hadn't prepared any sort of explanation, but it came along as I talked, partly true and partly not. He was old enough to make it possible to hint at rather a nasty story, which was the only kind I could think of."

"What a mind!" Joyce exclaimed, much shocked. "Get on!"

"I mean, I didn't have to invent much, if I made it a nasty story; and I'm never any good at inventing, even when I'm not hungry and frozen

and miserable. So I let him understand that somebody in the neighbourhood—a man—had asked me down for the week-end, to join a party, and that I found there wasn't a party, that I was all alone with him; and that he made love to me, and I got frightened and escaped out of the window, and ran for miles and miles and miles—I made it lots of miles, to put him off the scent; and that I'd fallen down once or twice, and then fainted in a ditch. You see, Joyce, it was fairly true; and I couldn't have told him everything, could I? He'd probably have got frightened of me, if I had, and driven away, and sent a policeman back to look after me. . . . Oh, he was so angry! He wanted to know who the man was; said he ought to be horse-whipped; he'd horse-whip him, himself, if nobody else would; and he'd make his name—well, you know; that disgusting thing that old gentlemen make names do, when they don't like them. Of course, I thanked him very much, and said I couldn't bring strangers into a thing of this sort; and I made up some brothers, who were very good at horse-whipping, and would like doing it; and then he was nice enough to drop the subject. He hadn't got a looking-glass in his car—I think he had almost everything else—and I wasn't inclined to get out and let anybody see me, if I could help it; but he assured me I looked all right—'very nice,' he said; and he took one rather large branch out of my hair for me, but left all the

rest in. Perhaps he thought they were meant to be there—a sort of woodland wreath—and that I should be cross if he mentioned them as if they were accidental."

"Once, at a dance," Joyce put in reflectively, "I had a large smut in the middle of my forehead; and when I discovered it, and asked my partner why he hadn't told me, the fool said he thought it was a beauty-spot. . . . Did your old man bring you right up to your door?"

"Yes. Wasn't it sweet of him? It was miles out of his way. Oh, he stopped at the first inn we came to, after he'd found me, and got out and bought me things to eat and drink; slices of bread and butter and ham and beef, and some brandy and water in a flat bottle. They did taste good; I don't know when I've eaten such a lot; and I think I must have drunk a little too much brandy, because I fell asleep, while I was smoking a cigarette that he gave me, and didn't wake up till we got here, about one o'clock. I was afraid he'd think that rather rude, but he was awfully nice, and asked me to go and have dinner with him the week after next, when he's coming up, with two of his daughters, to his flat in Cavendish Square. He's a widower."

"Well, you might do worse, my girl. We none of us get any younger," her friend philosophized. "So that's the end of the story. You *were* a fool."

"Why?" asked Shirley penitently.

"To go to that beast's house at all. Didn't I tell you he was up to something?"

"I know; but it seemed ridiculous. He'd always been so kind and friendly. Besides, how could I possibly guess that he was a magician, born hundreds of years ago? I never heard of such a thing."

"Really? It's fairly common. But I warned you that he was no good; and you might have guessed he was the sort of man who'd make up any lies, or behave in any abominable way, to get what he wanted."

Shirley fell into momentary abstraction. The excitement of recounting her adventures had left her, and her bruised face was sad.

"You think he made it all up?" she asked presently, with some obvious hesitation. Joyce gaped on her rustically, with round eyes and a dropping jaw.

"Oh no! *I* think, of course, that he *is* Old Mother Shipton, and was born in the reign of William the Conqueror, and runs about in the shape of a wolf at nights. But then I've got such a trusting nature. I wasn't sure if you had."

"Well, but look here!" argued the other, who seemed to have some lingering doubts as to the mortality of Sir Edward. "How do you account for me not being an utter wreck after what I went through last night? I was frightened out of my

seven senses, and I fell out of a third-floor window, and was frozen stiff, for nine hours or so, in a ditch. Ordinarily, if I walk too far, or sit up late a couple of nights running, I'm fit for nothing next day. It must have been that stuff he gave me that pulled me through it, and left me practically all right at the end."

"I didn't say it wasn't; in fact, I should think it very likely was. But that doesn't prove that he made it out of something that he found in Canterbury Cathedral, centuries ago, does it? Lots of these drug-things buck one frightfully for a time, I believe; especially if one isn't accustomed to them. That stuff that Tommy Barclay died of—cocaine, wasn't it? She used to take it to cheer herself up. And there are others, too; I don't remember their names. Probably to-morrow you'll feel like a stale banana. It hasn't worked off yet; that's all; and no doubt it saved your life last night. Drunk people hardly ever come to any harm. You were drunk. You're still drunk."

"I don't feel drunk," Shirley said cautiously. "But I certainly look it, so perhaps I am. And, according to you, there's no more in it than that? But then why on earth did he make up all that rigmarole? Is he mad? Part of the time he was talking I thought he was mad, and that frightened me more than anything. I'd rather meet a wizard

than a madman, any day, wouldn't you? You *can* reason with a wizard, I suppose."

"I talked to David Devant once, when I went on the stage to help him with a trick," answered Joyce, "and he seemed most reasonable. Yes, I dare say Edward's a bit touched; but I'm sure he isn't as mad as all that. Very likely he believes in some of this spiritualistic bosh, but he doesn't fancy he's Doctor Dee, any more than I do. Only he finds that he can get a certain number of people to swallow anything he tells them—you, for instance, and dear Basil Jacinth (ugh!) and Rita and Gathorne, who really is mad, I'm afraid, or rather hope, considering the way he goes on; and some of those people you heard, up to some revolting beastliness in the chapel, no doubt; and it gives him a position, and makes them obedient. Of course, a good many of the gang must know it's all rot; Magdalen—"

"You don't think she's in it?"

"I'm sure she is. And old Lewis, who doesn't believe anything, even when it's true. But they like all the nasty part of the business, so they back him up in his lies."

"Well, he must be an extraordinary actor," murmured Shirley, clearly not yet convinced. "If you could have heard him tell his history—and see him! Sometimes he really seemed to forget I was there, and be talking for his own pleasure; absolutely

bursting with conceit and a kind of disgusting delight. No, I can't believe he's just a fraud, as you say. Either he's speaking the truth. . . ."

"Shirley!"

"Well, then he's raving, and can play at being sane, in public. Isn't it too horrible? Oh, but Joyce!"

"What?"

"His ears! That magician had short ears—they were cut you know, as a punishment; so had the man in Holborn that the police were after; so has he. Isn't that rather . . . *could* it be only a coincidence?"

The fear in her eyes shewed that she found this evidence of identity hard to surmount.

"You've only got his own statement that Dee's ears were cropped," Joyce pointed out. "Very likely no such man ever existed; *I* never heard of him. What's much more probable is that he read about the Holborn case, and saw how he could get up a belief that he was in it, and hadn't changed for thirty years. He's just the sort of person to have bits of himself cut off to help him to act a part. Or perhaps the fact that he had naturally deformed ears suggested the whole idea of this immortality business to him; if he hadn't grown any older during the last generation, he might just as easily go back a few centuries. That seems an easier explanation of the ear-touch than his own, to my mind."

"It does, doesn't it?" Shirley said eagerly. "So it was all just a ghastly performance, to frighten me. What do you think they were up to, when I . . . ? What do you think he meant to do to me?"

Joyce pouted her lips, raised her eyebrows, and shook her head slowly.

"I can't imagine. But I'm sure of one thing: it was worth all you went through, to get out of that room before he came back."

For once in a way she spoke quite seriously, and Shirley, turning a shade paler, looked into the fire in alarmed silence.

"What are you going to do about it?" asked Joyce, of a sudden.

"Oh, nothing."

"Nothing?" cried her friend, startled into indignation. "Nothing? You mean to say you're just going to sit tight and let that devil go on with his games, just because you yourself managed to escape by the skin of your teeth?"

This was undoubtedly what Shirley had meant, for she moved uneasily in her chair, and her colour returned and deepened.

"I don't see what I can do. I can't do anything."

"Rot! You know you can; and you must, too. Think of that scream you heard—"

"But I heard a lot after. It might only have been someone in hysterics."

"Yes; or it might have been that wretched girl

who had dinner with you, whom Edward had roped in for his tortures, just because people like you, in the past, have funked giving him away."

"But she knew all about it. She wasn't an outsider, like me."

"Who told you that? Truthful Edward, wasn't it? Not the girl herself, any way. And whether she was a new hand or not, you know how they treat some of their—their initiates, or whatever the idiot word is. There was that woman in Holborn—"

"Joyce!" cried Shirley, going white again. "You don't think they murdered her?"

"I don't. If I did, I'd be off to the police station this instant. But even *they* would hardly *begin* an evening's amusement by murdering somebody, particularly somebody that you'd already seen, and would miss. Unless of course they were going to murder you too; and I'm sure that wasn't Edward's idea."

"Then what are we to do?"

"Inform against the whole beastly crowd, of course, and get them stuck in prison; Edward and Gathorne and Madame—I wish you could remember her name, but a great, fat Jezebel like her ought to be traceable. Oh, and the servants—the nigger—but they'd be sure to swear they hadn't any notion of what went on in the cellar. I bet Magdalen was there. I wish we could get her; and Bumpus and Lewis.

Above all, Lewis; 'scurvy, filthy, scurvy old' Lewis. But Edward and Gathorne, anyhow; and that'll pay off my score as well as yours."

"We don't know that Mr. Burrell had anything to do with it."

"No; he may have been doing a fresh air cure; otherwise it looks as if he was taking part in the game. Or can you think of any other reason for him being there?"

Shirley shook her head.

"Evidently he wasn't sent after me, anyhow; and I'm pretty sure Sir Edward didn't know where he was. A man can't be sent to prison for sitting in a bush; and I shouldn't imagine it's a crime, as far as that goes, to say you're a wizard and can't die, unless you make it an excuse for getting money out of people. You see, he didn't do anything to me; or, as far as I actually know, to anyone else."

"He did. He shut you in a room, and wouldn't let you out. They call that false imprisonment, and he can be had up for it; and then all the other things are sure to come out about him. Oh, you must!"

"It would be horrid," Shirley complained resentfully. "What do you expect me to do? Go and tell a policeman about it? I'm sure he wouldn't have the patience to listen to such nonsense."

"Policeman! Of course not. You go to a solicitor, and he brings an action, or files a petition,

or one of those things. If you haven't one of your own, you can use ours. You've met Mr. Calhoun, haven't you?"

"The man who's deaf in one ear, and has to turn his head back to front to hear you, if you're sitting on his wrong side at dinner?"

"That's him; but he's gone deaf in the other ear, too, lately. Mummy says that's an advantage for a lawyer, because he can hear both sides impartially. He's not a bad old thing, and he carries a telephone for one to talk into, so there's no difficulty. Shall I get him to come and see you?"

The face of the other girl was expressive of a mulish recalcitrance.

"I should feel such a fool," she pleaded. "He—Sir Edward, I mean—would only deny everything I said, and get a lot of the people who were down there to back him up; and the judge would make stupid jokes about timid young ladies overrating their charms, and all the jailers and lawyers would laugh at me; and then I should go out and drown myself. No, Joyce, I can't. I'm sorry, but I can't. I'll warn everyone I know to have nothing to do with him; but I can't do more than that."

"You *are* a funk," Joyce candidly informed her, without any animus. "Never mind, poor old thing! You've had a mouldy time, and I don't wonder you're not feeling up to any more, at present. Leave Edward Talbot to me. I bet I can make things un-

pleasant for him, without bringing you into it, either."

"Oh, I don't mind being brought into it, so long as I don't have to start it. I'm not really a funk; only I should so hate to be the joke for the day in the *Evening News* and the *Star*. . . . I say, you will stay to supper, won't you? I told Margaret you would; and you can ring up your mother from here. Do! I don't feel like spending all the evening alone, after what happened last night."

"I should love to," Joyce replied, rising with alacrity and passing out into the hall. "I'll get through now, before Mummy goes up to dress. . . . Western, double three, four, three, double two . . . no, double thrrrree. . . ."

CHAPTER XI

A FEW days later the Cassilis family left London to spend Christmas at Overbourne. Shirley had been asked to make one of the party; but as she was only taking the briefest holiday, and had already accepted a dinner invitation for Christmas-day, she was obliged to refuse. Of Joyce, during her month's rustication, she heard nothing, Miss Cassilis having long solved the difficulty of keeping pace with her numerous correspondents by declining to write any letters at all. Sir Edward had utterly vanished out of Shirley's world; although she still started at times when there came a ring at the front door of her flat after nightfall. On such occasions she was often to be seen stationed in the hall, with her hand on the telephone, until the nature of the summons was explained; so that, if no actual illness resulted from her experiences at New Place, her nerves had obviously been considerably shaken. Little by little, however, in the commonplace routine of her life she recovered her normal demeanour, while the expression of her face proved her to be happier than she had been for some years; an odd but undeniable effect of her association with one whom she now had good cause to detest and

dread. Nor did she meet any of the more intimate friends of the pretended speculator, some of whom were likely to have formed a part of the congregation in the underground chapel in Kent. Magdalen Herbert, for instance, who had at one time almost pestered her with affectionate attentions, gave no sign and uttered no word; not that she was out of London, for she had been reported present at a recent dinner party at her parents' house in Phillimore Gardens. Possibly the supposed initiate was afraid to meet her former friend, possibly she was disgusted at the poor spirit that the novice had shown. Whatever the cause of the estrangement, Shirley was heard to make no complaint on the subject.

Early in February a card arrived by post from Palace Green indicating that Mrs. Cassilis had resumed her bi-weekly "afternoons"; and on the following Sunday Shirley found herself seated in the room in which she had made the acquaintance of Sir Edward Talbot, adding her unobtrusive contribution to the general clatter of feminine tongues. There were ten or twelve women present, but Captain William Lovat was the only man to be seen; and his heroism was soon accounted for by a whispered communication from Joyce, made as she handed Shirley a plate of cakes.

"Freeze out all these bores; I want to talk to you afterwards. Billy and I are engaged," mur-

mured the nymph quickly; and retreated, scarlet-cheeked, to the corner seat where her sunburnt shepherd awaited her.

Of the rest of the company Shirley had met only a few before: Mrs. Lampson, incalculably rich, but so modestly arrayed that strangers, seeing her pass into her palace in Carlton House Terrace, were prone rashly to assume that the family was out of London, and that the house was in charge of a caretaker; Mrs. Egerton, the pretty young wife whom Joyce had suspected of too lax an interpretation of the clauses of the marriage contract; and, of course, Mrs. Cassilis herself, effusive, handsome and elephantine. Besides these there were present half a dozen women of an approved London type, gracefully dressed, accipitral of nose and eye, saurian of mouth, thin, noisy, and more or less convincingly "made-up."

Side by side with Mrs. Egerton on a sofa, Shirley had been laughing at the propositions of her neighbour, who, whatever her secret history, was a lively and engaging person, when her attention was distracted by the entrance of Magdalen Herbert, in her accustomed condition of mysteriously smiling langour. The new-comer was obliged to pass Shirley on her way to her hostess, and she greeted her carelessly, with a good-humoured and sidelong nod; seating herself however, after the greetings were

achieved, on the opposite side of the room, and taking no further notice of the friend for whom she had so lately professed the warmest feelings. There was no mistaking the snub; for her immediate neighbours treated her as the merest acquaintance, and there was an empty chair at Shirley's very elbow; but there had been no trace of displeasure in her recognition, so that it was to be presumed that her neglect was only due to the death, for want of proper nourishment, of any interest which she had formerly taken in the dress-designer.

"Magdalen, *you* can tell us," Mrs. Cassilis urged, when the disturbed circle had settled down again, "what in the world has happened to Sir Edward Talbot?"

"I haven't an idea," drawled the girl, taking off her right-hand glove with deliberation. "He hasn't been to see me this ten-age."

"Nor any of us," her hostess told her. "He used to be here constantly, and we haven't heard of him now for—oh! six or seven weeks, at least. Of course, we were away for Christmas, but I wrote and asked him down to Overbourne, and never had any answer at all."

"Where did you write to?" asked Billy Lovat.

"New Place, first; that beautiful house at Rye, which he took last year, you know; but afterwards I imagined that he must be in London, and that

his letters hadn't been sent on, so I wrote to his flat. When I still heard nothing, I tried his club —that was three or four days ago. None of the letters have come back . . . and there it is! Do you think he can be out of England?"

"P'raps," said Magdalen, without interest.

"He's just the sort of man that does start off at a moment's notice, as the mood takes him," Mrs. Cassilis loudly ruminated. "But I'm rather surprised he didn't send us a line of any kind. We were quite old friends, and he was so fond of Joyce. Wasn't he, darling?"

"Mummy! We couldn't stand each other," her daughter protested.

"Don't be silly! When he stayed with us, last summer, he devoted his whole attention to you and Shirley. . . . Oh yes! Little Shirley, you've no news of him, I suppose? Well, isn't that strange? Nor has Mr. Lewis—nor Rita—anyone. If he was on the Riviera, he'd have had plenty of time, by now, to have got my first letters and answered them."

"I expect he's gone back to America, Adela," Mrs. Lampson suggested, "and you'll hear from him presently."

"That must be it. But it was very bad of him to steal away like that. We were most anxious to find him, because he was poor Mr. Burrell's best friend. He had such an influence over him that we thought he might have done him good. You

heard about poor, dear Gathorne Burrell, Magdalen, naturally?"

"Oh yes! He's off his head, isn't he?" Magdalen asked, eating a sandwich with an air of detachment.

"He's *dead,*" announced Mrs. Cassilis in a shocked voice.

"Is he? Poor Gathorne!" murmured the girl perfunctorily. "When did that happen?"

"Only yesterday. I dare say it was a blessing, for they tell me he was very bad—not likely to recover for years, even if he ever did. It doesn't really seem true; it doesn't seem possible. The number of times I've seen him coming in at this very door!" she reflected in an astonished tone, as if she had always regarded such an action as a certain prophylactic against insanity. "Such a nice—such a handsome fellow! We'd noticed that he was getting a little *farouche* lately; he'd neglected us a good deal; but we never guessed! How dreadful life is sometimes, isn't it?"

The ladies murmured their assent to this appreciation of human affairs; and Mrs. Egerton sought further particulars.

"Too horrible! He was quite young, wasn't he? What did he die *of?*"

Mrs. Cassilis shut her eyes.

"Oh, my dear, don't let's *think* of that! Of course, he didn't know what he was doing; and it

was scandalous that he wasn't better watched. Quite an expensive place, too; and they seemed such nice people, so Captain Lovat says. Didn't you?"

"I thought they were all right—kind and that, you know," answered the soldier.

"Captain Lovat took endless trouble about the poor fellow. In fact, nobody else lifted a hand to help him. There are relations, too—uncles, and so on. Would you believe it? They all stood aside, and let a comparative stranger shoulder all the trouble and responsibility."

"Oh, there wasn't very much one *could* do," Billy assured her. "And Burrell had moments of being fairly all right; and then he'd be quite obedient about everything."

"You know you simply slaved," she insisted. "First, to get him out of that horrible place where the police took him—he was found wandering, Caroline; and if he hadn't happened to have a tailor's bill in his pocket they wouldn't have known who he was. Then to find this retreat place, and get hold of his family, and arrange the money difficulty. You *should* have let us help. It makes me feel so guilty to remember, that I did nothing at all."

"Really, there wasn't work enough for two," he comforted her, "I didn't think there was any object in bringing in more people than were absolutely necessary. It was a pretty depressing business; and I'm glad it's over, for everyone's sake."

"Did you see the poor thing after he—after you'd put him under proper care?" one of the guests enquired.

"Yes, I went down once or twice; sometimes he'd be quiet, and sometimes it was pretty ghastly. And yesterday they wired for me. It happened in the early morning. . . ."

He looked distressed as he broke off, and his brown face paled a little. The spectacle reduced the company to an uneasy silence.

"Do let's talk of something else," Magdalen proposed, with undisturbed composure. "Gathorne's out of his troubles, and we don't all want to get the horrors. Mrs. Cassilis, dare I ask for some more tea?"

If the interruption was expressed a little heartlessly, it was none the less warmly welcomed; and before another three minutes were over the general attention was engrossed by a recent and most deplorable scandal, in which the names of several intimate friends of most of those present were fascinatingly involved.

One by one, the guests chattered their way out of the room; but Shirley, obedient to Joyce's whispered order, stood her ground, and presently went to join the newly betrothed on their sofa, where she conveyed her felicitations in a discreet undertone, was warmly thanked by the captain, and informed by Joyce that the subject, from the point of

view of news, was now closed, and to be considered hereafter as a commonplace and accepted fact, unworthy of special comment.

"Mummy knows all about it," she murmured, with a watchful eye on her unconscious mother, "and says she refuses her consent now, but that we may ask her again in a year's time. Of course, that's just nonsense, but there's no object in arguing about it. Billy and I thought about the first week in July. . . . You'll see me off, won't you? I think I'll get Noel for another; two's quite enough. No kids. They always cry and fight, and have to be taken out in tears. Besides, what have kids got to do with it, anyhow? . . . Now let's drop it."

The party had been by this time reduced to the conspiratorial three, and Mrs. Lampson and her hostess. Magdalen had left without a word either to Joyce or Shirley, to both of whom she had merely smiled her farewell from a distance. The two elderly ladies were deep in a conversation that soon grew so confidential as to call for a greater privacy; when Mrs. Cassilis, after excusing herself to Shirley, and smiling with a significant indulgence on her daughter and Billy, removed her friend to a neighbouring writing-room. Left alone with the forbidden lovers, Shirley displayed some disposition to return to the subject of their espousals but was checked at the outset.

"We particularly wanted you to wait till the

others had gone," Joyce firmly interrupted her, "because Billy's got something to tell you that you'll be interested in. I let him know what you told me about Edward Talbot—you don't mind, do you? and we made all sorts of plans for bowling him out, before he could do any more harm. Billy never liked him—did you?—thought he looked a wrong 'un; so he rather jumped at the chance. The idea was that he should run down to Rye in his car, and see how the land lay first—who was at the house, whether the neighbours knew anything about what was going on, and so on; and then decide what was the next best thing to do. However, before he had a chance of starting, the whole affair straightened out of its own accord. Only a few days—three or four—after you'd been there, some sort of a tradesman—who was it?"

"My tailor, Marshall," Billy continued. "The police had come to him to make enquiries about Burrell, and he referred them to me as the only friend of his that he knew of. It was Burrell who'd recommended Marshall to me, about the middle of last year. Well, the police told me that for some days there'd been stories of people being frightened, in the Rye neighbourhood, by the sight of a fellow wandering about the lanes and fields, obviously not all there. He doesn't seem to have done any actual harm; in fact, one of the things they objected to was that he always ran away, full speed, when he

met anyone; jumping hedges, scrambling through ponds—any old way. But his appearance put them off, and, poor chap, he must have looked pretty awful, from all accounts; clothes hanging in rags and simply plastered with mud, hair on end, all torn and covered with blood, white face, glaring eyes—not at all the sort of thing to meet in the dusk, if you were alone. Once a farm-girl went into an outhouse in the early morning to get a pail or something. It was pretty dark, and there was a great heap of straw or hay in the corner, and as she looked at this, she saw a pair of eyes watching her. She got back to the door in a bit of a hurry—she knew they were a man's eyes, she said—and let out one yell; and the next moment he'd burst out on her in a flash, squirmed under her arm and round her, and was away, running like blazes across the fields. Another time, a party of kids were coming home from school in the late afternoon, when he stalked out of a coppice, crossed the road, with his face turned towards them and staring down at them, slithered on his stomach under the hedge, made a funny noise—like a hare, one of them told the police—and took to his heels. They could see him going for some time, flying over everything that came in his way, his arms flapping like wings, and looking back every two or three seconds over his shoulder. Then a parson walked right into him at the corner of a lane one night. The padre

had been out to dinner, and was on his way home. Burrell jumped back as if he'd trod on a snake, and looked at the old boy in a way which he didn't like a little bit. He was pretty scared, but he managed to ask what was wrong; you see, Burrell looked very much as if he'd been pitched out of a car through a thorn-hedge into a clay-pit. 'It's you again, is it?' said Burrell, cursing the parson in the most sulphuric way—not that he'd ever met him in all his life; and then he bolted down the road, the way he came. The parson told the police, and they beat the neighbourhood next day, and at last walked him up out of a whin, somewhere in the Lydd direction. He put up a great fight, but they got him trussed up finally, and off to the nearest police-station. By this time, of course, they realised what was the matter with him, for he shouted at the top of his lungs, about murders and goodness knows what all, while they were getting him along. Evidently he hadn't eaten for days, and even the bobbies admitted that they were frightened to look at him."

"Billy tells a story jolly well, I think," Joyce put in, with approbation; but Shirley only nodded palely.

"Well, Mrs. Cassilis told you what happened then. He had money in the bank, and we got him into a decent sort of 'approved' house at Littlestone, instead of the asylum. The doctor in charge took in

a couple of other patients, and struck me as a sensible fellow; but evidently he was a bit slack, for yesterday morning he left Burrell alone in his room for a minute or two; and he immediately broke—well, he finished himself off, thank God! I don't believe he'd ever have got well; and he was only about twenty-seven, and might have lived another fifty years."

"I hated him a good deal lately," reflected Joyce. "You know he was rude and beastly at times; wasn't he, Shirley? But if he was mad, it wasn't his fault. It was a rotten way to finish off, and he used to be nice."

"I suppose," said Shirley, "he was mad, last time I saw him. Joyce told you about that, didn't she?"

"I expect he was, more or less," Billy agreed, "but he may only have been on the verge of it then, and broken down altogether an hour or two later. Because that's not all about him. While he was in this 'home," he told Mr. Lilly a most extraordinary story, which Lilly passed on to me yesterday. Joyce has heard it already. No doubt it was all a delusion, Lilly said, although he appeared to be rational enough while he was telling it. . . . I wonder! . . . Talbot has certainly disappeared."

"What?" cried Shirley, with dilated eyes.

"It came to this. Lilly didn't profess to remem-

ber all of it, or exactly how Burrell put it. Talbot, so he said, had spoilt his life for him, since they became friends, a year or two ago—how, Lilly didn't know; but he rambled on about disgracing him, and ruining his health, and parting him from some girl he was in love with. Apparently there was no doubt he had the drug habit very badly, and he looked as if he drank too, and his nerves were all to rags. In some ways, Lilly said, he was like an old, worn-out man. It wasn't the result of his going mad; there was what Lilly called 'physical degeneration, as one finds in senile decay.' Those were his actual words; I remember them quite well. And yet, you know, he didn't *look* any older than he was, did he? Burrell said that he'd been perfectly well and happy before he met Talbot, and that he'd had lots of friends; but that he'd lost everything since by allowing himself to be badly influenced. Very likely he was speaking the truth there. We know now, after what you've been through, Miss Cresswell, that Talbot was—or is—a poisonous sort of fellow; and he and Burrell were very thick for some time. Finally, it seems, they had a regular bust-up, and separated; and from that moment Burrel was determined to get his own back somehow. I think he gave Lilly to understand that the loss of this girl of his, whoever she was, was the last touch, and that soon after that he began to make plans for his revenge. He tried to do Talbot harm, first

of all, in all sorts of milder ways—by giving him away to his respectable friends, and so on; but nobody would listen to him—naturally, because Talbot always looked quite sane and pleasant and clean, and made himself agreeable to everybody; whereas Burrell had already been bowled out (so he said; I never heard of it) in one or two nasty affairs, and was getting wilder and dirtier and druggier every day. Finding this was no good, he quite calmly decided to kill him, while he was able to do it; for he didn't think that he himself would last much longer. Well, the country seemed a more suitable spot for a murder than London, so he took to haunting the neighbourhood of the house at Rye, whenever Talbot was down there. He wasn't going to risk failure, and a good opportunity was sure to turn up presently he thought. Talbot would walk out into the garden at night, or into the woods in the daytime, and he could be caught alone, out of hearing of his servants, and finished off, and buried."

"So that was what he was waiting for!" murmured Shirley, in a breathless undertone.

"That was it. He'd been there several other nights; but the house was always shut up, as soon as it began to get dark, and Talbot never seemed to go out except in a closed car, driven by a chauffeur. As soon as he saw you, however, he saw a chance of pulling it off. He didn't tell Lilly who you were; all he said was that he came across a

girl—a girl he knew to be decent—running away from the house at midnight evidently terrified out of her life, and apparently just fresh from a struggle with somebody. He was pretty sure that Talbot would never let her get away and tell her story, without trying all he knew to catch her and stop her mouth somehow—he wouldn't have thought twice about killing you, Burrell declared, if he'd thought it necessary; so the moment he heard you get back through the bush and begin to run down hill towards the gate, he went straight up to the house, turned on an electric torch that he'd brought with him, and rang at the front door. It was opened to him at once by 'the black devil who helped him in his work,' he said. Lilly took this to be mere raving, but I suppose he meant that nigger woman who waited on you. And the next moment Talbot himself appeared white and raging. He forgot all about his quarrel with Burrell, which I dare say he'd never taken very seriously—"

"I'm sure he hadn't, from what he said to me," put in Shirley.

"And he didn't trouble to keep up his usual behaviour—that god-like calm you know. All he was concerned about was to get you back in the house before you gave the show away; and Burrell played up to him like anything. He pretended that he'd tried to get down earlier in the evening—for the service or ceremony, or whatever it's called, I

suppose, though he didn't mention that to Lilly. Apparently he had a sort of general invitation to attend these games. He told Talbot that he'd fallen asleep in the train, and been carried past his station; and when he got back to it by the next train, there was no trap or cab to take him up to the house, so that he had to walk. Soon after he got through the lodge-gate, he met you walking fast downhill. You wouldn't stop, or say a word, but tore across the road, got into the fields on the other side, and went on towards the sea-shore. He hardly liked to stop you, as you appeared to be in your right mind; but, for all that, he was afraid something must be wrong, or you wouldn't be walking about in the country at this time of night. So he thought the best thing to do was to hurry to the house and ask Talbot's advice. There'd be no great difficulty in catching you before you reached the sea, as you were hobbling and fairly out of breath when he met you. He didn't think you meant to drown yourself, because you seemed to be heading straight for a little line of cottages, whose lights were the only ones to be seen from the lodge-gate. Talbot hardly answered. He was dressed in a sort of dressing gown and slippers, but he grabbed Burrell and dragged him away down the drive, then and there. 'Turn out that light of yours till it's wanted, Gathorne,' he said, 'which way did the fool go?' 'So,' Burrell told Lilly, laughing like anything, 'I

steered him off to the waste ground that lay between the fields and the sea.' "

Carried away by the dramatic nature of his tale, Billy was beginning to supply his characters with a suitable dialogue; and Joyce regarded his earnest, sunburnt face with manifest pride.

"Once or twice," the young man went on, "Burrell would sing out 'Was that her?' or something like that; and he kept edging Talbot away from the cottages and down on to the foreshore. Presently the two found themselves in a little sand-hollow, with nothing whatever in sight, and the sound of the waves tumbling close by. 'And then,' said Burrell, 'I pulled him up, and told him why I'd brought him there. I didn't look at him while I did that, because the devil's eyes always frightened me. I knew they were on me now. He wasn't a bit rattled. All he said was that I'd be sorry later on, to have played the fool with him in this way. You see, I really believe he'd forgotten that a bullet or a knock on the head could finish him off as easily as any other man. He knew it was so, of course, but he hadn't thought of such a thing for so long. . . . I hated his calmness. I was sure that in another second or two he'd have me beaten, if I didn't do something at once. But fortunately he made a mistake; he turned and began to stroll away; and that moment I tucked my head down and went for him. He shot round like lightning

and caught me a crack on the jaw that nearly broke my neck; but I closed, and stuck the whole nine inches of it into his left side, just above the hip, and down he went, bellowing like a bull. I couldn't get the damned thing out, but I felt a big stone under my knee, and I got it in both hands and smashed up his skull with it, just as we used to smash up butterscotch on the desk at school.' "

"Don't rub it in too much, Billy," Joyce warned him. "Shirley doesn't like it."

"I'm sorry," apologised Billy, who was now openly enjoying himself. "But really that was very much what Burrell said. Lilly seemed to remember that part almost word for word. Oh yes! and he said there was one odd detail that puzzled him a little. Burrell kept calling this fellow 'Kelley.' . . ."

"That was the name, of course!" exclaimed Shirley.

"Kelley and Talbot, indifferently; and mixing up all kinds of remarks about living for ever, and evil spirits, and goodness knows what. Naturally this inclined Lilly to believe that the whole story was just nonsense—delirium—a hash-up of things that Burrell had read in books; but he thought that he'd better mention it to the police, all the same, in case there was anything in it. Well, they knew of Talbot, as a rich man who had a good many visitors; and they pointed out that if he'd really disappeared suddenly and mysteriously, some of these friends, or

his servants, would have made enquiries about him long before this. I ought to have told you that it wasn't until he had been three weeks with Mr. Lilly that Burrell told this yarn. However, as a matter of form, they sent a man up to New Place, who found it locked-up and apparently empty. Then they really got to work to trace Talbot; and they found he'd left no address for letters at the post office, nor had he paid the tradesmen's books. His London flat was shut up, and his club knew nothing about him, and one or two of his friends, whom they got onto, had nothing to suggest. All they found out was that some of the villagers had seen three cars, which they recognised as Sir Edward's, dashing about the country, at high speed, on that Sunday afternoon and evening; but what happened to them after that couldn't be traced. They seemed to vanish off the earth. Possibly they may have had their number-plates taken off, and been sold to someone who wasn't too particular. The servants too, whom the tradesmen knew by sight, had covered their tracks. You'd have imagined that the black girl would have been pretty easy to follow; but they never saw a hair of her; and as for the visitors, there was nothing to show who they were, or what became of them. Well, then they broke into New Place. All the furniture was there, not even covered with dust-sheets, the linen and plate were in the cupboards, and they found lots of stores

and food in the larder and other places, some of it rotten. It seemed quite clear that the house had been deserted at a moment's notice, and, if Talbot had lived there alone, this would have supported Burrell's story. But one couldn't think of any reason for the silence of the guests and servants, or why they should clear out in this peculiar way. The whole business looked so fishy that it was decided to make a search of the beach, for any evidence of a murder. There were a good many sand-hollows, and some of these were on the foreshore, and so covered at high-tide. I forgot to say that Burrell never told Lilly what he did with the body, or whether he did anything with it; when he got to that point, he went quite off his head again with excitement, and talked the maddest rubbish. Nothing was found to show that his confession was anything more than a bad dream; but supposing that the place had been washed every day by the tides, there would be no traces left, probably, and the body might very well have been carried out to sea. Where they found a hole that answered the description above high-water-mark, they dug up the sand, to see if by any chance he'd buried Talbot, but they had no luck. . . . He's just gone. Either he's at the bottom of the sea, or underground in some place they haven't spotted yet; or else he was badly frightened by you escaping, with that beastly story against him, and thought it wiser to clear out until the thing blew over. Or, if

he found you didn't mean to say anything about it, he could have come back again, before long, with his latchkey, and taken possession of his house again; saying he'd been abroad in the meanwhile. That seems far the most likely explanation, after all, don't you think so?"

"Why?" asked Joyce. "I should say that Gathorne was telling the truth. Probably he chucked the body in the sea. Then all these beauties at the house, finding Edward didn't come back, would imagine he'd got into trouble; and, as they didn't want to be let in as well, they scattered and lost themselves."

"But at once?" Billy objected. "You see, Joyce, from what the villagers said about the cars, it looks as if the whole gang was out of the place before Sunday night. Surely they'd have waited at least a full day before deciding that he didn't mean to come back?"

"They mightn't. One doesn't know all they'd been up to in that cellar. . . . Oh yes! Tell Shirley about that!"

"What was that?" asked Shirley.

"I was forgetting," Billy said. "Yesterday, when I'd left Lilly, I thought I'd like to have a look at New Place, and see how it answered to your description of it to Joyce. I don't mean that I thought you were romancing about it, of course; but I wondered if things had been left as you saw them in the chapel,

and whether it would be possible to get any clue to Talbot's whereabouts from anything he'd left behind down there. So I got leave of the police to go over the house. A bobby went with me. . . . Everything was just as they had said. Beds, some made, others that had been slept in; the table you dined at, still half laid; books and papers lying about; dead flowers in vases—nothing out of the way or suspicious; an ordinary, well furnished house, from which everybody had fled suddenly—the sort of thing one used to see in France. The organ was still open in Talbot's study, and I went down the steps, through the cellar, and up the winding staircase, at the other end, which led to the room which you jumped out of the window of. The table and the two chairs were still there; so were the bottle and the glass, both of them empty and dry, but the books had been taken away. In the chapel itself nothing had been left but the bell—I suppose that was too heavy to move—and the benches, pushed against the wall. I saw the niches; but there was nothing in them, nor in the cupboard in the wall. The banners you talked about had been taken down, and so had the two big curtains. But there was a heap of curtains in an attic upstairs, and I think I spotted the throne in the drawing room; one of a pair of huge chairs. Evidently the chapel was the one place they'd taken the trouble to clear up, before they bolted."

"That looks as if they knew Talbot wasn't coming back again," Joyce suggested.

"Do you think so? He might very well have been afraid of the house being searched, and some of his secrets being found out, while he was away," replied Billy, "particularly if it wasn't safe for him to reappear for a long time."

"No; I believe he's dead," Joyce persisted, "and I'm sure I hope so."

"He'd be no great loss, by all accounts," Billy agreed. "Though, as far as we're concerned, I don't know that it matters. If he does bob up again, he's likely to keep clear of our set, and look for his disciples somewhere else."

"Still, I should like to think of him as dead, after the harm he's done," said Joyce. "What's your opinion about it, Shirley? You look very meditative."

The other girl started.

"Oh, I expect he was killed. He wasn't the sort of man to run away, unless there was something very bad to face—like that dead girl in Holborn. He could easily have explained my story away, and made me look a fool. Yes; I believe Mr. Burrell killed him."

"Two to one, Billy," Joyce proclaimed. "My only regret is that Gathorne didn't slaughter all the rest of the crowd, while he was about it; particularly dear

Mr. Lewis, who's long been ripe for the dust-bin. But it'll probably break up, now that it hasn't got the great man to slobber over. At all events, he can't do any more mischief, and you were lucky enough to escape with nothing worse than a fright, Shirley."

Shirley hesitated for some seconds, and then spoke, laughing a little, but not entirely naturally, and with an obvious anxiety in her eyes.

"Unless he was speaking the truth about himself."

"How do you mean."

"That stuff he gave me to drink," she explained, in the same tone of forced amusement. "Supposing . . . it'd be an awful bore to be immortal."

Billy welcomed the joke delightedly; and Joyce looked at her friend with an ambiguous expression of entertainment.

"I don't know. Perhaps it would. . . . Oh, but I shouldn't bother about that. When you've had enough of it, you just call in Mummy's doctor, and say you feel ill. He'll soon fix things up for you."

THE END